
Interview with a lady from the Sikh tradition.

(Betty's words are in italics)

Part I

The topic I have chosen is to interview a Sikh lady who lives in Richmond, BC, some thirty minutes' drive away from my home. I first met Betty Gill at the home of my sister-in-law. The reason that I chose to learn more about this religion is that the Sikhs are a prominent ethnic minority in the Vancouver area. Betty is a widow in her seventies and she lives in a suite attached to the home of her daughter.

I have always had a positive regard for the way the Sikhs organize their lives so I was not apprehensive about this interview. I had a certain admiration for the way I perceived that the Gurdwara was a focal point where everyone was welcomed and especially how they organized the communal meals.

As we relaxed in armchairs in her living room, Betty was happy to tell me about her grandfather who had come to Canada from the Punjab with his two brothers in 1904. They had worked as farm laborers until they established a trucking business, "The Cedar Core Sawmills," on False Creek, Vancouver. Everyone used wood for fuel, so they went from house to house selling firewood. Many Sikh immigrants worked in this and other sawmills. Some mills had a bunkhouse and communal cookhouse to accommodate the men. Eventually, their families arrived from India and the men had saved enough money to buy homes. The early immigrants cut their hair and wore Canadian fashions but they felt that these were simply surface changes. "Canadianization" was the price they had to pay for coming to this country.

1947 was a significant year for the Sikh's in Canada as they were granted Canadian citizenship and India became independent. This was the year when Betty came to live in Richmond, BC.

Betty's mother, Mrs. Bhani K. Johal, came over to Canada in 1927 with her son, Bunta, who was nearly three years old. Betty herself was born in Vancouver and then there were seven more girls. *"My parents never complained about having so many girls, but accepted each child as a gift from God"*. Altogether, there were eleven children in the family.

Part II

Betty's childhood was bound up with life at the Sikh Temple on W. 2nd Street. She said, *"There were far fewer Sikh's in Canada in our young days and the church was the focal point in our lives. Church was what we looked forward to on Fridays, Saturdays and Sundays. We didn't go to shows or clubs - church was our social place and our worship place."*

In response to my question about the role of the women in the Sikh temple, she replied, *"The women do the main cooking. We pay a person to cater to the church and make the meals but if some families want to serve the church they will do all the cooking themselves. Men help the women with heavy work, but the women do the cooking of the vegetables and the chapatties, or roti. It's all modernized now with the mixing bowls, kitchen equipment, etc."*

As I was interested in the role of women in the services, Betty said that they were allowed to read the scriptures. *"They take a role in reading when there is a continuous reading for three days. Some will come and take a two hour shift. The men and the women come and take a two-hour shift on a three-day religious ceremony. That's called Akand Path. This starts on Friday around 10 a.m. and doesn't finish until Sunday morning at 10 a.m. The reading might take place in a private room and at the same time there might be a wedding performed in the main hall. The final reading is brought to the big hall. The Guru Adi Granth is written in Punjabi and contains the hymns of the Sikh Gurus and various saints. It is the advice of the Gurus through these hymns (Gurbani) that is our teacher, 'The Guru'. That is why we acknowledge it, by bowing before Sri Guru Granth Sahib."*

When I asked how often such a reading was done, she said that it happened quite often and it all depended on how the individual Sikh wished their service to be done. *"Some could just have an afternoon service, or just an evening service. Tonight there is a service and the women are getting their cooking done now (about 12 noon). Individuals decide who wants to sponsor a service. Weddings are booked two years from now. It could be a joyous occasion, like the birth of a baby, fiftieth anniversaries, twenty-fifth anniversaries. The community is so large that they will come to church and have it there and everyone will come and help them celebrate. Then after a funeral you go to church and do the final reading, - at the temples, the gurdwaras. Festivals such as birthdays of our Gurus have special services. Every person, whatever his or her social status, take food together"*.

I asked if the sacred scriptures were read at home and Betty replied that she did not read them but she listened to them. She showed me a CD with different prayers recorded for use at different times of the day. She preferred to listen even though she can read and write Punjabi. *"You can go from the morning to the evening and then you do the evening again and the final prayers. I just do this in my living room. I listen to the Japji Sahib every morning - it's a twenty-one minute reading - and the evening one I stand up and pray before I go to bed. When we pray we stand respectfully with folded hands. Some Sikhs have a room set aside in their homes, like the Temple, where the prayers are said every day."*

To describe what role religion plays in her life, Betty said, *"God takes care of everything. We have faith and hope. You say your prayers and all you want is for your family to have good health, happiness, and succeed in whatever they do, and that is my personal prayers. I thank him every day and ask him to keep them safe"*.

So far as belief in one God was concerned, she said, *"Yes, but then there are the Gurus. They are the one's for the Sikh religion. We believe in all ten gurus. They are not God but they are human beings who have the teachings, and it is their teachings that we read"*. (Betty then offered me a book entitled *"Basic Principles of Sikhism* and said that it explained what the Gurus had done, how they fought the wars, and how Sikhism was born.). She pointed out the five "Kakars" which are worn by many Sikhs: the Keshha (uncut hair which is considered a gift from the guru); the Kanga (used to keep the Keshas clean and tidy and worn in the hair); the Kara (an iron bracelet which is related to when they went into battle); the Kachhera (specially designed underwear which symbolizes high character); the Kirpan (a small sword reminding a Sikh to be free and progressive). Betty said that she was a member of the Khalsa but she did not consider it necessary to wear these signs. This book also outlined the Sikh concept of God, using nine descriptions: There is but one God. He is all pervading. His Name is everlasting. He is the Creator. He is present throughout His Creation. He fears none. He is without Enmity. His existence is immortal. He is not born, nor does He die. He is self-illuminated. He is realized through the grace of the Guru. God abides in the world and is not in any distant place.¹

Concerning the meaning to a Sikh of the rite of baptism, Betty told me that they call it Amrit. *"The baptisms were performed by the Giani Ji (like a priest). You tell him you are going to come with your newborn baby. He does a reading and then he gets a steel vessel and it has the 'knda' which is the symbol of Sikhism. He uses that with sugar cubes and he says prayers as he mixes the water. Even an older person can be baptized when they say they want to become a true Sikh. They do the same thing with the water and the sugar and then everyone has a sip of it. The Gian Ji anoints the baby on the forehead five times and does a reading. Then he picks up the book and opens it wherever and the first letter of the first paragraph he tells you and you name your child with that. He reads the paragraph and it is amazing what it says which always seems very appropriate for that child. My children were baptized"*.

"These days you can have many Giani Ji at a temple, but there is always one main person and the others are his co-readers. They are paid and they live in at the temple. Mostly they are all married men with families. Back in India they have attended colleges and they are well read. They can close their eyes and recite the scriptures".

Betty added that some Temples in the area of Vancouver are more socially active than the one she attends. One has built an old people's home, and schools, but more recent immigrants attend them. When I mentioned small groups meeting, Betty responded that the women did meet together. They had singing and prayers but that politics also crept in and that is why she did not go to that group. *"Religion should be above politics. It is something in the heart, within"*.

The time had passed quickly, so I thanked Betty for sharing her thoughts with me and promised to go back for a cup of tea when I returned the three books that she had loaned me.

¹ Sikh Missionary College. *Basic Principles of Sikhism* (Ludhiana: Sikh Missionary College, 1983). pp.2,3.

Part III

My response was that I could empathize with the way Betty's faith sustained her life and answered her spiritual needs. I also respected her personal discipline of daily prayers.

The beliefs and practices of Sikhism seem to produce a courageous personality with a strong work ethic. (Confidence in God and giving thanks for his material blessings). Their daily work is part of "being a good Sikh".

The realization of the presence of God comes through contemplation of the scriptures (Guru Adi Granth).

Personal discipline is strong, whether shown in daily prayers, or in the wearing of the five Kakars, or in moral behavior. (e.g. Prohibition against intoxicants, tobacco, and encouraging charity to others).

There is a sense of belonging to an extended family and emphasis on caring for the material needs of others.

I learned about the important and central place given to the scriptures and I learned that individual Sikhs organized services at the Temple. Also, how individual Sikhs sponsor events, such as the communal meal. I also learned about the significance of the baptismal rite of Amrit.

Although women are treated as equals it does seem that the paid Giani Ji and all his assistants are men.

There is an obvious difference in the way the "moderate" Sikhs and the "fundamentalist" Sikhs interpret the rules of conduct concerning the outward actions of true Sikhism. I immediately saw some parallel with the different Christian interpretations of the faith.

We hardly touched on the actual rituals of the public services but that subject would demand it's own field study.

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