

~~3HO FOUNDATION~~

VANDUSAN BERY

May 6, 1979

Wahe Guru ji ka Khalsa

Wahe Guru ji ki Fateh

Sadh sangat ji,

I have been invited to take a few moments to address the sangat (and especially the English-speaking guests) on one aspect of the Sikh religion. Since Mr. Gurdial Singh Neel has already spoken so eloquently, I will only attempt to add a few thoughts of my own.

As the world's youngest major religion, Sikhism has a special sense of its historical roots and development. Sikhs are proud of that history. And the history -- both the history of the events in the lives of the ten Sikh Gurus and of subsequent events in the growth of the Sikh Panth (or community) -- is kept alive in the retelling.

Sikh history is recounted not simply as entertainment but as a way of bringing to life the Sikh religious ^{beliefs} ideology. One of these points that Sikhs like to emphasize ^{by historical example} is the Sikh commitment to religious freedom. And the following story is often told by way of illustration:

During the second half of the seventeenth century, the Moghul ruler in Northwestern India was the Emperor Aurangzeb. At the time of the Ninth Sikh Guru, Guru Tegh Bahadur, Aurangzeb embarked on a policy of religious persecution of non-Muslims. Stories were told of the demolition of temples and forced conversions; taxes were reimposed on Hindus visiting their places of pilgrimage. At this time, a delegation of Hindu Brahmins from Kashmir appealed to the Sikh Guru Tegh Bahadur for protection from the tyranny of the Moghul officials. And the Guru undertook to gather his many disciples to stand firm against the persecution of the government. In the end, this defence of the Sikhs and Hindus cost the Guru

his life -- as he was apprehended, tried, sentenced, and executed by the Moghul officials.

This martyr's death of their Guru was and ^{still} is seen by the Sikh Panth as a sacrifice made not simply for the Sikh cause but for the sake of religious freedom in general. And the following words that Guru Gobind Singh wrote about his father's death express that feeling:

To protect their right to wear their
caste-marks and sacred threads,
Did he, in the dark age, perform the supreme
sacrifice.

To help the saintly he went to the utmost limit,

He gave his head but never cried in pain.

He suffered martyrdom for the sake of his faith.

He lost his head but revealed not his secret.

He disdained to perform miracles or juggler's
tricks

For such fill men of God with shame.

He burst the bonds of mortal clay

And went to the abode of God.

No one hath ever performed an act as noble as his.

This historical Sikh commitment to the cause of religious freedom is important in today's world. Here in the West, there is no modern-day Emperor Aurangzeb and instead of blatant religious persecution the Sikhs in Canada are confronted with Canadian notions of religious freedom. However, in their lives, Canadian Sikhs are often confronted with rules and regulations which seem to have the effect of penalizing them for practising their religion. It is not surprising, therefore, that they find it incongruous that the martyrdom of Guru Tegh Bahadar in opposition to the explicit persecution of Aurangzeb's government led ultimately to the

revitalization of the Sikh Panth under Guru Gobind Singh and Maharaj Ranjit Singh while the explicit freedom of religion under the Canadian government seems not to protect them from having to give up some of their central religious practices to "accomodate" Canadian norms. It is in that sense -- and in the context of the present "hardhat struggle" -- that the sangat and its guests are reminded of the historical Sikh sacrifice for religious freedom. ^{Today,} The Panth looks not for another martyr for the cause of religious freedom but rather for the sort of political representation which will make religious freedom a reality.

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