

EDITORIAL

RELIGIONS AND WORLD PEACE Mistaken Identity, Recognized Identity, and Similar Identity

The heinous crime committed on September 11 was declared by President George Bush as 'Attack on America'. In fact it was 'Attack on Humanity' as several thousand innocent persons of various religions, nationalities, races and ethnic groups lost their lives without any of their fault. The terrorists hijacked four planes, slammed two of them into the twin towers of WTC, third into the Pentagon building and crashed the fourth into the ground in Pennsylvania. The gruesome attack totally destroyed the Twin Towers, partially damaged the Pentagon building and had a significant negative impact on the US economy whose ripple effect was felt globally. The other tragic consequence of this horrendous attack was a sudden blow to the peaceful co-existence of people of different religions and ethnic background not only in the North America but also in Europe and far away Australia and New Zealand. Soon it was declared that the terrorists belonged to Al-Qa'ida, an organization of Osama bin Laden, a Saudi Arabian exile in Afghanistan. As soon as the picture of Osama bin Laden was flashed on the TV screen in the North America and rest of the world, the general public in USA, Canada, and UK started to hate all the persons with beards and turbans.

For an average American anybody with beard and turban looks like an Afghan or a Muslim. The irony is that there are very few Afghans or Muslims with beards and turbans in the North America, but many Sikhs keep beards and turbans as their religious symbols. People started to hate and kill any person with beard and turban without identifying whether the victim is a Sikh or an Afghan or a Muslim. Most of the victims of this mindless and vindictive frenzy turned out to be the Sikhs due to the 'mistaken identity' with Afghans or Muslims. Similarly, the Sikhs were also ill treated at airports, railways and buses, and even on streets and shopping malls. Their houses and shops were damaged and some have been shot dead. Even three months after the September 11 attack another Gas Station Sikh Owner was killed in West Haven, Connecticut, USA on December 15. In the same week, in Washington DC a Sikh woman was stabbed repeatedly while she was sitting in her car. (Please also read the Guest Editorial by Dr Barrier in this issue.)

Soon after the September 11 attack, prayer meetings

and vigils were held throughout the world to pay homage to the victims and to express sympathy and solidarity with the victims' loved ones and the US government and its people. President Bush participated in several interfaith meetings to emphasize religious harmony and that the war against terrorism is not against Islam. At such interfaith or remembrance gatherings, every religion proclaimed that their religion is the most peace loving and preaches equality for all humans. The irony was that no representative of any religion or any individual from participants questioned that if every religion preaches peace and brotherhood of mankind then why inter-religion and intra-religion fights are going on involving all the religions throughout the world. I did mention this in my brief note in remembrance to the victim of this terrorists' attack in a small interfaith gathering held at Montreal.

The text of the one-hour videotape on Osama bin Laden released by Pentagon on December 13 revealed a very gruesome information from *Hadith* as interpreted by Osama bin Laden: *I was ordered to fight the people until they say there is no god but Allah, and his prophet Mohammed. The irony is that it was also mentioned in this tape that: This was Jihad and those people were not innocent people (World Trade Center and Pentagon victims). He swore to Allah.* (The Gazette Montreal, December 14, 2001). From this tape it was not difficult to blame a religion for this act of terrorism although some Muslim scholars may deny it on the bases of misinterpretation of verses in *Hadith*.

Dr Parvez Hoodbhoy, a Professor of nuclear physics at Islamabad's Quaid-e-Azam University and a visiting research scientist at MIT, and a regular contributor to the Karachi newspaper DAWN, has given unbiased analysis about the attack of September 11 and Islam. It is worth to note that the root cause of the current terrorism is the religion in the hands of fanatic clergy of Islam. His analysis is summarized as follows (Reproduced with permission from the Editor: *The Dawn*, Karachi, October 10, 11):

"Fearful of backlash, most leaders of Muslim communities in the US, Canada, and Europe have responded in predictable ways to the Twin Towers atrocity. This has essentially two parts: first, that Islam is a religion of peace; and second, that Islam was

hijacked by fanatics on September 11, 2001. They are wrong on both counts.

First, Islam - like Christianity, Judaism, Hinduism, or any other religion - is not about peace. Nor is it about war. Every religion is about absolute belief in its own superiority and the divine right to impose itself upon others. In medieval times, both the Crusades and the Jihads were soaked in blood. Today, Christian fundamentalists attack abortion clinics in the US and kill doctors; Muslim fundamentalists wage their sectarian wars against each other; Jewish settlers holding the Old Testament in one hand, and Uzi in the other, burn olive orchards and drive Palestinians off their ancestral land; Hindus in India demolish ancient mosques and burn down churches; Sri Lankan Buddhists slaughter Tamil separatists.

The second assertion is even further off the mark. Even if Islam had, in some metaphorical sense, been hijacked, that event did not occur on September 11, 2001. It happened around the 13th century. A quick look around us readily shows Islam has yet to recover from the trauma of those times

Abdus Salam, a Noble Laureate in Physics, died deeply unhappy, scorned by his country and excommunicated from Islam by an act of the Pakistani parliament in 1974. Today the Ahmadi sect, to which Salam belonged, is considered heretical and harshly persecuted. (My next-door neighbour, an Ahmadi, was shot in the neck and hurt and died in my car as I drove him to the hospital. His only fault was to have been born in the wrong sect.)

Muslims must not look towards the likes of Osama bin Laden; such people have no real answer and can offer no real positive alternative. To glorify their terrorism is a hideous mistake - the unremitting slaughter of Shias, Christians, and Ahmadis in their places of worship in Pakistan, and of other minorities in other Muslim countries, is proof that all terrorism is not about the revolt of the dispossessed."

If we look into the cause of all the troubles and fights going on in the world and the analysis of Dr Hoodbhoy about Islam, the blame falls on religions because every religion is about absolute belief in its own superiority and the divine right to impose itself upon others. It is only Sikhism, founded by Guru Nanak during 15th century, where there is no such element but teaches altruism and egalitarianism. The irony is that in every case it is the minority religion, which is a victim whether the trouble is in India, Israel, Palestine, Ireland, Pakistan, and Afghanistan; and now in USA, Canada, and UK. It is also clear from Dr Hoodbhoy's analysis

that such fights are not only confined between majority and minority religions but within the various sects of the same religion in the same country.

The recent incidence of victimization of the Sikhs due to their '*mistaken identity*' with that of the Afghans or the Muslims has threatened the uniqueness of the *Sikh identity* due to their beard and turban. Contrary to this situation during 1984 immediately after the assassination of Mrs Indra Gandhi, Prime Minister of India, by two Sikhs, the majority Hindus started killing the minority Sikhs throughout India because of their '*recognized identity*', i.e. the beard and turban from which the Sikh were easily recognized for killing. Tens of thousands of Sikhs were killed or burned alive, and their shops, houses, businesses were burned down throughout India. Maximum killing and property damage was done in Delhi, the seat of Government of India.

Let us go back to 18th and 19th centuries when the Moguls killed the Sikhs because they were having '*similar identity*', i.e. beards and turbans, similar to those of the Muslims but were practicing the faith of Guru Nanak that was different than that of Prophet Mohammed. Thus, it appears that the Sikhs have been killed because of their either '*mistaken identity*', or '*recognized identity*', or '*similar identity*' (beard and turban) since these identities were assigned to the Sikhs in 1699.

The recent attacks on Sikhs due to '*mistaken identity*' have shattered the concept that the Sikhs are unique because of their identity of beard and turban. Still a directive came from the Akal Takht, Amritsar that the Sikhs should wear *kesari* (yellow) colored turban with pointed end to distinguish themselves from those of the Afghans and the Muslims.

Thus, the Sikh clergy tried to create another identity for the Sikhs. It is unfortunate that the Sikh clergy back home is unable to comprehend the problems of the Sikhs of the West but is always ready to issue unscientific and illogical directives or *Hukmnamae* (edicts) without understanding the problems of the Western Sikhs.

A few years ago a *Hukmnama* was issued by Jathedar Ranjit Singh against the use of chairs and tables for eating *langar*, which was in practice in many Gurdwaras of British Columbia (BC), Canada for the last several decades with the approval of Jathedar Giani Partap Singh, who was advised by the Sikh scholars on this matter (*Spokesman*, March 1997, P 15). In this connection about ten Sikhs were excommunicated by Jathedar Ranjit Singh. Consequently, this *Hukmnama* divided the Sikh *sangat* of BC into two groups, moderates and fundamentalists. This issue remained

unsettled for a long time, which forced the Sikhs *sangat* of some Gurdwaras of BC and that of across the border from the adjoining states of the USA to form their own organizing committee, *North America Shiromani Gurdwara Parbandhak Committee* (NASGPC). There are 41 Gurdwaras under this committee, i.e. 36 from BC alone and 5 from across border in USA. There are many non-*kesadhari* Sikhs in the managing committee of the Gurdwaras as well as of the NASGPC. Similar organization, *Ontario Gurdwara Management Board* (OGMB) was created in 1995 in Ontario state of Canada, although there was already in existence an old organization, *Association of Gurdwaras of Canada*. Recently another organization, *Canadian Sikh Council*, with its head office in Ottawa has been established.

Besides a number of Sikh organizations in Canada, a new organization, *Singh Sabha International* (SSI), to reform Gurdwaras in the world has recently been established by Mr Hardev Singh Shergill, of the Khalsa Tricentennial Foundation of North America, Roseville, California, USA and his several associates from USA to disseminate the message of Guru Nanak incorporated in the Aad Guru Granth Sahib. Besides this there was already a *World Sikh Organization* existing with its offices throughout the world.

Back home in 1995 *World Sikh Council* was established by the then Jathedar Manjit Singh with its offices in USA and other countries. This was sabotaged by the next Jathedar Ranjit Singh. Until now it remained ineffective to show any improvement in the religious or political affairs of the Sikhs. Then another organization, *Sikh Core Group*, with its branches in India and the West was created in Chandigarh. Now a new *International Advisory Council* and at least five *Advisory Committees* in a bid to tone up the working of the highest temporal body of the Sikhs and to deal more effectively with the *Panthic* matters have been created by Mr Kirpal Singh Badungar, the new President of Shiromani Parbandhak Committee, Amritsar (*The Tribune Online*, January 8, 2002).

Before the celebration of the 'Tercentenary of Khalsa 1999', a *Gurmat Chetana Lehr* (Awakening Movement) was started in 1996 by the Shiromani Gurdwara Parbandhak Committee (SGPC), Amritsar and the *Institute of Sikh Studies*, Chandigarh to initiate (baptize) all the Sikhs as *Amritdharis* with 5Ks identities (*kes*, *kara*, *kirpan*, *kachha*, *kanga*) before 1999. At that time I pointed out to the Sikh clergy and the Sikh authorities that it is time to go to the basic tenets of Sikhism,

incorporated in the Aad Guru Granth Sahib, to make the Sikhs understand what is *Sikhi* (Sikhism) before converting them to *Amritdharis*. But it turned out to be all in vain.

After four years of their rigorous efforts the result of this movement was that now in the primary, high, and secondary schools, colleges, and universities of Punjab and outside of Punjab in India there are from 40 to 80 % Sikh students, who are without 5Ks or with only one or two Ks. Similar is the situation in the West. The recent attacks, because of racial hate or '*mistaken identity*', on the Sikhs in the West and their harassment at public places have affected the minds of many young Sikhs to remove some of the Ks.

In spite of the fact that there are so many Sikh organizations in India and in the West, the Sikh youth of Science Age is still bewildered about *Sikhi* (Sikhism), *Gurbani*, and Sikh identities being taught in the Gurdwaras and in literature.

A Message for the Sikh Clergy and Sikh Organizations:

Now there is a big question in the minds of the Sikhs of the Science Age to be answered by the Sikh clergy, Sikh authorities, and all the Sikh organizations of the world:

Are 'singh', 'turban', and 'beard' the unique identities to be a Sikh as has been taught?

The last name, '*singh*' is already no more unique for the Sikhs since many million Hindus have '*singh*' as their last name. Now the unique identity of '*beard*' and '*turban*' has been shattered due to the fact that Sikhs are being killed and ill treated because of the '*mistaken identity*' with that of an Afghan or Muslim.

Finally a Message for the Clergy of all the Religions:

If every religion believes in One God and the whole humanity its creation then the clergy and the authorities of every religion should stop imposing their own absolute belief, superiority, and divine right upon others and start practicing and teaching altruism and egalitarianism to the followers of their religions. This will not only eliminate terrorism from its very roots but will establish ONE WORLD ORDER AND PEACE on this tiny planet, the earth.

Prof Devinder Singh Chahal

The answer to the above question may be found if we can define, *Who is a Sikh?* Visit the following Web site for an article, *Defining a Sikh: UNDERSTANDING SIKHISM*: <http://www.dsUPER.net/~dchahal>
(This article has also been published in the *Sikh Virsa*, Calgary, and *Sikh Bulletin*, Roseville, California, in their January 2002 issues and copies of this article have been sent to the SGPC, Amritsar, Editor, Sikh Review, Calcutta.)