

## NATIONAL RELATIONSHIP CONFERENCE 6 FEBRUARY 2007

### A SIKH PERSPECTIVE

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A passage from Sikh scriptures, while making passing reference to family and other relationships, makes clear that our ultimate allegiance is to God and to principles of responsible living that emanate from this belief.

*The Guru says:*

*You are my father;*

*You my mother*

*You my brother;*

*You my kin*

*You my convert;*

*You my pride*

To a Sikh, belief in God is not abstract. It implies an acceptance of responsibility and commitment to the Creator of our one human family, something that Sikh scriptures dwell on in some detail. It follows that Sikhs are expected, above all else, to be true to the underlying values and beliefs of their faith..

Today, there is a lot of talk about our different religions and cultures, and it's easy to forget how much we have in common. In Shakespeare's Hamlet, Polonius's words to his son Laertes, as he leaves for university, echo this Sikh teaching on the need to be true to our values and beliefs :

Polonius says to Laertes:

*'And this above all, to thine own self be true, and it will follow as the night the day, that thou cannot then be false to any man'.*

The importance of our ultimate allegiance being to deeply held values and beliefs, rather than man made institutions, was also underlined by the philosopher James Russell Lowell who wrote:

*'We owe allegiance to the State: but deeper, truer more  
To the sympathies that God has set within our spirit's core'*

Let me explain some key Sikh beliefs and values that affect relationships. They flow naturally from Guru Nanak's first sermon when he said

*'na koi Hind; na koi Mussalman'.*

That is in God's eyes, there is neither Hindu, nor Muslim, and by today's extension, neither Christian , Sikh nor Jew. That God is not interested in our different religious labels but in our actions.

This respect for different ways of life leads to a belief in the equality of all human beings and this extends to a recognition of the full equality of women. From this follows respect for different religions and different ways of life.

The Sikh view of life is that we start from fundamentals of belief which give us a sort of personal foreign policy; a way to view and react to the world about us. In this looking outwards, Sikhs differ from the monastic or ascetic view of religion that was common in the subcontinent at the time of the Gurus, some 500 years ago. Guru Nanak, the founder of the Sikh faith once met a group of such ascetics who had left their families and society to search for God in the mountain wilderness. They asked the Guru in a superior way, 'how goes the world below?' The Guru responded that the world was suffering, and how could it be otherwise when those with knowledge and wisdom desert it in such a selfish way.

He taught that we should live like the lotus flower, which has its roots in muddy waters, but still flowers beautifully above. Similarly, he taught that we should live in society, work constantly for its improvement, but always be above its meanness and pettiness.

Sikhs believe that the underlying cause of most of our social ills lie in human greed and a selfish pursuit of personal happiness at the expense of others. Looked at in this way, the way to a fairer world must begin with looking to the needs of those around us – starting with the role of the family. Sikhs see marriage, fidelity and the family as central to the health and well being of society. Of course there are times when marriages fall apart and a single parent is left as an innocent sole carer. But we shouldn't allow understanding, compassion and support for those in such situations to blind us to the importance of an ideal, or to the damage caused by transient, adult relationships, particularly to the hurt that these can cause to children. A short true story makes the point better than any words of mine.

Two small boys were fighting, hammer and tongs in the school playground. With great difficulty, a teacher finally managed to prise the two apart demanding to know what it was all about. Looking at the teacher, with eyes swollen with tears, the smaller of the two children said it was because the other's dad had taken his mum away.

While it is wrong to condemn those who choose different lifestyles, there is clearly a need for a greater emphasis on individual responsibility and the benefit to society of stable family relations. In the Sikh view this starts with marriage and the degree of respect and commitment that those getting married have for each other, and how they view their separate responsibilities.

At the time of Guru Nanak some 500 years ago, the position of women on the subcontinent, and much of the western world was clearly inferior to that of men: they had few rights and were treated as mere chattels. The Guru thought this both wrong and absurd. He taught complete equality and, to emphasise this equality, the last of the Sikh Gurus, Guru Gobind Singh, said that women should keep their maiden name after marriage, as individuals in their own right. At the same time, he said that all Sikh women should be addressed with the title 'Kaur', literally princess to underline their elevated status in life. This raising of the status of women is further emphasised in the Sikh marriage service, which describes the new partnership as one of equals.

As a result of these teachings, Sikh women have always enjoyed a greater sense of self-esteem and worth than their counterparts in many other parts of the world. Unfortunately, surrounding culture and custom sometimes prove a negative influence, and the religious teaching of full equality has not always been the norm.

In recent years, the growth of more enlightened thinking in much of the world, has resulted in a much wider acceptance of the principle of full equality, with women playing a fuller role, not only as mother and wife, but also in many other walks of life. This in turn has led to a sometimes, bewildering change in the role and responsibility of the husband or father, who is expected to play a greater part in child care and in everyday chores.

Ignorance of these changes, or a stubborn unwillingness to accept them, and work as a team, often leads to stress or a breakdown in relationships.

In our family, thanks to the intelligence and good humour of my wife, and the tolerance of our two daughters, the change has been managed fairly well. I've been allowed to retain the role of hunter gatherer, and bravely face the charge of supermarket trolleys, in gathering food for the family for my wife to turn into nourishing meals. I regularly feed the dishwasher and put the clothes out to dry in the garden while chatting to the next-door neighbour. I'm indispensable in advising on a new dress. When my wife and daughters have narrowed it down to a choice between two, they ask me which I prefer—and then choose the other!

Seriously though, in my view at least, the family is an excellent training ground to prepare us for life in the wider world. If a husband and wife can accept their partners failings and inadequacies- like leaving the top of a tube of toothpaste, or stacking a dishwasher the wrong way; if parents can show a semblance of equanimity in entering the chaos of a teenager's bedroom; if children can learn to live with the constant needling of siblings and dull and irrational behaviour of parents, then members of the family have all the necessary life skills to take on the wider world!

Sikhs and Christians, and other world faiths, recognise their responsibilities to those beyond the family. Christians have the example of Jesus Christ who talked of his wider family. Guru Nanak, in his concern for the underprivileged, upset his father, a prominent businessman, in his interpretation of what constituted a good business deal, or value for money. His father tried to get him interested in commerce by giving him a sum of money to invest at a good return. The young Nanak dutifully took the money, and accompanied by a friend, set off for the city. On the way, he saw some hungry and sparsely clad people shivering in the winter cold. Despite his friends warning about how his dad would react, Nanak spent all the money in food and clothing for those starving at the wayside. It took all the diplomatic skills of Nanak's sister to make peace between Nanak and his angry father.

Sikhs are given a golden, threefold rule for responsible living:

*'Naam japna, kirt karna and waand chakhna'*.

'Naam japna', is regularly reflecting on the teachings of the Gurus. This helps us to get a perspective on life that helps us distinguish between that which is truly important and the trivial, which often assume exaggerated importance in our daily lives..

'Kirt karna', is earning by honest effort, and thirdly and most importantly, 'wand chakhna', is sharing with others, particularly the less fortunate. The sharing and giving to others is not only of money and what it can buy, but even more importantly of our time, education and knowledge.

In family relationships, this failure to understand the need to give all important time and consideration to the needs and concerns of spouse, child and even parent, is perhaps the greatest single cause of family breakdown. The parent who rather than give his own time, gives £10 to a child and says go out and enjoy yourself, is not being generous, but selfish. Money can never compensate for the incalculable benefit of parent and child sharing time together.

To my mind, an unwillingness to find time for, and look to the needs of others is one of the greatest failures of modern society. Today, society encourages selfishness by constantly emphasizing the importance of the individual. Advertising constantly implores us to buy and pander ourselves because, as the advert says, 'we're worth it', suggesting that in this way we can buy contentment and happiness.

The reality is that today, with previously unheard of affluence in the western world, there is almost a parallel increase in social problems like drug or alcohol dependency and prisons full to bursting, often with the victims of the selfish lifestyle of others, or with those who feel they have a right to acquire wealth and thereby happiness by fair means or foul, or those who believe that personal gratification is so important, that it doesn't matter what harm it causes others. And what do we do about it? We say lets build more prisons.

The Sikh Gurus taught that 'where self exists there is no God , and where God exists there is no self. A Christian theologian put it succinctly when he wrote:

'It is the 'I' in the middle of sin, that makes it sin.

To me, a key to all successful relationships is for all parties in a relationship, to change from thinking and acting in terms of 'I or me', to 'we or us'.

Following from this, I feel it would be of enormous help to relationships, if we think in terms of what the industrial engineer, Mary Parker Follet, termed 'the law of the situation' She said that talk of two sides to a dispute or concern was unhelpful. All involved should think in terms of the situation, problem or concern, and what do **we** have to do together to resolve it. In previous incarnations as a mining engineer and management consultant, I've applied this approach many times, and also in advising on family disputes, and have found it extremely helpful.

The Sikh Gurus reminded us that we also need to think beyond our responsibility to the family or other grouping, to the wider world. 400 years ago, Guru Gobind Singh taught: 'manas ki jaath saab ek he pachanbo'. Recognize the oneness of the human family. At that time it was a reminder that despite religious and cultural and national differences, we all belong to the same one human family.

But this sort of thinking was not very common. Until very recent times, we could all grow up in the comfort and security of a background religion that we shared with those that lived around us. It was common and patriotic (it still is for some), to go into raptures about our way of life compared with the inferior ways of foreigners! Many believed that even God acknowledged our natural superiority, and was always on our side. The famous words of John of Gaunt in Shakespeare's *Richard II*, which we learnt at school, illustrate this type of thinking: H described England in the following words:

*This royal throne of kings, this sceptred isle,  
This earth of majesty, this seat of Mars,  
This other Eden, demi-paradise,  
This fortress built by nature for herself  
Against infection and the hand of war*

*This precious stone set in the silver sea  
Which serves it in the office of a wall  
Or a moat defensive to a house  
Against the envy of less happier lands*

-----And there is much more of the same!

At school, we learnt to appreciate the literary style, the use of figurative language. We never thought to criticise the xenophobic insularity of its general sentiment. I remember my English teacher not being very amused when I suggested the possibility of other nations having **different** explanations for God isolating the British! Seriously though, it's important to understand that this sort of thinking was common, and sadly, is still prevalent today, in most nations and cultures.

In the past, we could always strengthen our sense of cohesion and identity, including religious identity, by misrepresenting the ways and beliefs of others, or describing them in disparaging terms. The dictionary definition of heathen for example is 'those who are not Christian, Jew or Muslim'. Because of geographic distance, it was safe to talk in a disparaging or condescending way about other faiths because it was unlikely that we would ever come in contact with the inhabitants of distant lands. In the same disparaging way, many in India, even argued that to leave the shores of India would pollute them forever. Emphasis on difference and the inferiority of others has long been a historic norm,

But all this has dramatically changed with fast increasing globalisation. Yesterday's butt of 'foreigner' jokes is, due to cheaper air travel and the increasing movement of people, now our near neighbour, often literally, and this leads us to current concerns over integration and community cohesion, and talk of Britishness; why can't they be more like us?

But such talk immediately runs into difficulties. As we all know that it gets more even difficult if we talk of European identity. Can we have both distinct British and European identities? What is the shared relationship between say, the Greeks and the French?

There are distinct cultural differences between people from different parts of the world. But culture is never constant and changes with time. It is an interesting aside, that those who leave a country, make efforts to hold onto the exact culture and customs they left behind, while the country the country of their origin continues to change. We see this particularly in dress and social customs of those from the Indian subcontinent, with these sometimes being considered distinctly old-fashioned by the present inhabitants of the subcontinent.

In much the same way, there are distinct differences in attitudes to Britishness between the inhabitants of these shores, who, a century ago, ruled, and felt they were born to rule much of the world, and those who today talk about a distinct British identity, which is bound to change considerably in 20, or even 10 years time.

There is a law in science that says nature always tries to preserve an existing equilibrium by resisting change. It also applies to humans, and the more globalisation throws us together, the more we try to preserve or invent our distinctive identities.. We see it in attempts to define distinct British, Scottish and Welsh identities, and we also see it in religions focussing more on differences, than that which we hold in common.

We all need roots, a distinctive identity or something, to secure our identity in a fast changing world. But, in this, we should focus less on looking with nostalgia at, what was in reality, a never static past, , but at enduring values derived from religion and culture that are essential for life in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

We come back to where I started; the need to look beyond self or parochial interests to values that remind us that we are all members of the same human family, with a collective responsibility for future generations and the planet that sustains us. It is this vision that should define core British identity and that of sister nations.

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