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In the Wake of the Temple Shootings, a New Call for Sikh Leadership

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In the Wake of the Temple Shootings, a New Call for Sikh Leadership

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By Dawinder Sidhu

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Victims of Temple Shooting – Top left, Satwant Singh, Sita Singh, and Paramjit Kaur, Bottom left, Ranjit Singh, Prakash Singh, and Suveg Singh.
Image courtesy of www.harisingh.com

Sunday's shooting at a Sikh temple in Wisconsin represents a pivotal moment for Sikhs. Depending on the nature and extent of the Sikh response, the community can either emerge from the tragedy as a better-understood and more welcome part of American society—or it can fade from the public's consciousness into the shadows of American social space.

The early response suggests that Sikhs appear poised, perhaps for the first time in their history in this nation, to be a known and integrated group. But sustained engagement is necessary for Sikhs to achieve and maintain this position, and thereby

shield themselves from the hate and ignorance that threaten Sikh lives and welfare and that also undermine civil rights in the United States.

First, however, we should commend the selfless sacrifice of the law enforcement officers who put themselves in harm's way to protect innocents. But for the efforts of two policemen, Sunday's gunman might have killed or injured many more. These officers' efforts remind us of the amazing men and women in uniform who face danger on a regular basis in order for us to be safe.

The police officers risked their lives on behalf of Sikhs who were attending a Sunday morning worship service. A monotheistic religion that is now the fifth largest in the world, Sikhism was established in the 15th century in the Punjab region, along the border between present-day India and Pakistan. The founder of the religion, Guru Nanak, set forth three basic doctrinal principles: that individuals should reflect and meditate upon God, earn a decent and honest living, and serve others when possible. Hallmarks of his progressive leadership included his emphasis, during a time of significant conflict between Hindus and Muslims, on the essential humanity of all individuals. He also believed in gender equality and rejected the rigid caste system that unfortunately persists to this day.

Nine other individuals succeeded Guru Nanak and became trustees of his vision. The last such individual, Guru Gobind Singh, declared that, following his death, a compilation of hymns would be the subsequent and permanent guru for Sikhs. Guru Gobind Singh also mandated that Sikhs were to keep five articles of faith, one of which was that their hair should remain unshorn. Accordingly, Sikhs do not cut their hair, and Sikh males typically cover their heads with a turban.

Such defining elements of their identity, however, have been the reason that Sikhs have suffered the "disproportionate brunt" of the post-9/11 backlash in America, according to Yale Law School's Muneer Ahmad.



Vandalism at the Sikh Gurdwara in Fresno, CA
Vandalism at the Sikh Gurdwara in Fresno, CA.
Photo courtesy of Christian Parley, www.fresnobee.com.

Sikhs, because of their turbans and beards, became an accessible and superficial proxy for the hatred and emotion triggered by the attacks: they were profiled in airports, denied employment opportunities, harassed, bullied in schools, beaten, and stabbed—all on account of their appearance. In the most egregious incident, on September 15, 2001, Sikh Balbir Singh Sodhi was killed in Mesa, Arizona by a self-proclaimed “patriot” who was looking to kill some “ragheads.”

At first, Sikh-Americans did not have an existing framework to respond to such incidents. But shortly thereafter, a group of Sikhs, mainly the children of Indian immigrants in their 20s and 30s, came together to remonstrate with government officials, alert the media about incidents and correct inaccurate accounts, as well as to develop relationships with leaders and organizations from other communities.

These Sikhs faced a critical choice: to concentrate only on issues that Sikhs were encountering, or to argue more broadly for tolerance toward any group affected by the post-9/11 backlash. For principled reasons (including an appreciation for the historical lessons of the treatment of Japanese-Americans during World War II and a realization that any hate crime against any group undermines the civil rights of all), as well as practical ones (such as the limited resources of the groups even when taken together), the Sikh leaders opted for the more inclusive approach. And they have maintained this stance over the ensuing years, steadfastly refusing to succumb to the temptation of deflecting attention away from Sikhs and toward other minority groups. Even though Sikhs have continued to be targeted, this perseverance on the part of the Sikh leadership has made the community’s situation better than it would have been otherwise.

Sunday’s shooting, however, demonstrates that Sikh-Americans cannot rest in their efforts. The post-9/11 climate of fear, prejudice, and violence remains. Even so, Sunday’s shooting begins a new era for the Sikh community. Sikhs now have a sympathetic audience in the American public, and the mainstream media appears to have taken notice—Sikhs finally have a proper platform from which to share their narrative.

But whereas the immediate reaction to 9/11 required Sikhs to perform the community equivalent of ad hoc triage, this next stage of Sikh-American leadership requires each and every Sikh to be proactively engaged. No longer can the community look to a dedicated few to toil on behalf of the whole. No longer will it be sufficient for community members simply to work, attain professional or social status, and retire to their enclaves. Instead, all Sikhs will need to be actively involved in their neighborhoods and to serve as visible ambassadors of the Sikh faith and their identity.

The welfare of Sikh-Americans is threatened by the ignorance and bigotry of others. But it is also weakened or compounded by Sikhs’ own silence. Sunday’s shooting is a tragedy, but also a call for greater engagement from all Sikhs.



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