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Oak Creek and the future of Sikhs in America

By Dawinder Sidhu

Washington Post
October 2, 2012

In testimony before a [Senate subcommittee hearing on domestic terrorism and hate crimes](#), Sikh Americans demanded the federal government do more to protect the community from incidents such as the [shooting at a Sikh temple](#) in Oak Creek, Wis., which left six Sikh worshippers dead and many others traumatized. For example, [Harpreet Singh Saini](#), whose mother was killed in the temple shooting, urged the FBI to track hate crimes against Sikhs.

It is understandable for members of this community — who have been targeted after Sept. 11, 2001, suffered the [disproportionate brunt of post-Sept. 11 hate violence](#), and now lost six of their own in cold blood — to press the government for enhanced safeguards. After all, security is a first-order responsibility of government. It is also sensible for Sikhs to [ask the FBI to include Sikhs in its existing data collection efforts](#). The government's ability to effectively prevent and respond to hate crimes is only enlarged by the possession of particularized, group-specific information.

While Sikhs may be stressing what the government may do better, they must place greater emphasis on the one entity that can best ensure their freedom from hate and ignorance: themselves. Whatever the government may do to help, it is Sikhs at the end of the day who are the most reliable combatants against discrimination and associated crime. As to what Sikhs can do in parallel with government action, the answer is simple: civic and public engagement.

[Both Sikh and American principles support engagement as the way forward for Sikhs in America. The founder of Sikhism](#), Guru Nanak, traveled extensively throughout South Asia and the Middle East, meeting with members of various backgrounds and religions in order to spread his basic message: that we all share a common, single Creator, and that through reflecting upon Him, honest work, and assisting others we may attain happiness if not enlightenment. Guru Nanak's life and method of promoting [Sikhism](#) can be read as a call for Sikhs to engage others in the United States who may not be familiar with Sikh teachings or Sikh identity.

Across the world, the Founding Fathers recognized that the health of the United States depended on an active citizenry. "Those who won our independence... believed... that the greatest menace to freedom is an inert people," [observed Justice Louis Brandies](#). The founders also understood that there is practical value to such engagement. James Madison argued that the "greater variety" of interests in the country, the less likely it will be that the majority will be inclined or able to oppress

the minority. These benefits of diversity require, at a minimum, an awareness of other viewpoints – they cannot take place if a minority interest is silent or dormant.

There are thus principle-based and strategic reasons for Sikhs to engage with non-Sikhs. And to their credit, Sikhs are engaging with others. These efforts span the spectrum, from participating in public and academic forums, to organizing fun runs, and holding vigils and prayer services.

Even more encouraging is the fact that Sikhs are beginning to formalize these engagement activities. The [Sikh Council on Religion and Education](#) (SCORE) recently issued an appeal to Sikh temples around the country to invite their neighbors, friends, and colleagues to Sikh temples, where non-Sikhs can interact with Sikhs, observe Sikh religious practices, and partake in the free lunch that culminates the prayer services. SCORE urged their brethren to host these “open houses” over the next two months, with a view towards facilitating understanding and the breaking down of barriers to social harmony.

SCORE’s executive director, Dr. Rajwant Singh, explained to me that SCORE is coordinating these national events because Sikhs “ought to be out there spreading the word about ourselves.” Sikhs cannot “cling to the government” and expect it “to do everything,” he continued.

The government itself would appreciate Sikhs taking greater ownership over the solution to hate violence. Sikh engagement would relieve the load on the shoulders of the Obama administration, which remains embattled in protracted economic and national security problems. At the same time, Sikh engagement would please a Republican opposition that puts a premium on independence and self-sufficiency.

As efforts premised on engagement hold the promise to ensure the safety and security of Sikhs, the community would be well-served to make engagement a more central feature of its response to Oak Creek and its overall experience in the United States for years to come.

Indeed, Sikh engagement will hasten the day in which Sikhs and non-Sikhs will meet and break bread not because of ignorance, but because of affection; not to build bridges, but to renew and strengthen existing ties; and not as an ad hoc reaction to a tragedy, but as a regular, organic expression of mutual tolerance and respect
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