

**AMERICAN TERRORISTS TARGETING TURBANS:  
A CASE OF MISTAKEN IDENTITY  
Sikhism as a Religion of Peace and Enlightenment**

By Nick Gier

These are the garments they are to make: a breast piece, an ephod, a robe,  
a woven tunic, a turban, and a sash. They are to make these sacred garments  
for your brother Aaron and his sons, so they may serve me as priests.

—The Lord God to Moses, Exodus 28:4

Ninety-nine percent the people you will see wearing turbans  
in the U.S, Canada, and UK will be Sikhs, a religious group  
that originated in India during the 15th century.

—wiki.answers.com

**Turbans in the Bible and the World Religions**

Around the world millions of men (and some women) wear turbans for religious reasons: Ethiopian Orthodox Christians, Coptic Christians, Muslims, and Sikhs. Rajasthani Hindus, Rastafarians, Kurds, and Afghans wear them to indicate caste, tribe, or status. Turbans also serve to keep beards and hair clean, especially in desert environments.

Turbans are mentioned as sacred headdress in the Bible (Ex. 28:4; Lev. 8:9; Job 29:14; Ezek. 44:18; Zech. 3:5). The Hebrew God required a distinctive dress for priests, and a linen turban was one of the requirements. The Israelite priest must “put on the sacred linen tunic, with linen undergarments next to his body; he is to tie the linen sash around him and put on the linen turban. These are sacred garments” (Lev. 16:4). There were many Hebrew and Christian “ragheads” before Muhammed was ever born.

**More than 300 Acts of Violence against Sikhs since September 11**

More than any other Indians, the Sikhs have immigrated to many parts of the world, and, after September 11, 2001, they have sadly become targets of anti-Muslim/Arab rage. There are two mistakes here: (1) most American and European Arabs are Christians; and (2) the Sikhs are not Arabs, and they of course had nothing to do with the terrorist attacks in Africa, Europe, and the U.S.

American Sikh leaders say that they have received over 300 reports of violence against them since September 11, 2001. The first causality after the attacks was not a Muslim, but Balbir Singh Sodhi, a Sikh who was shot dead by Frank Roque in Phoenix, Arizona. He also shot at a Lebanese-American Arab Christian and fired at the home of

some Afghan-Americans. He said that he was targeting all “Arabs,” but two of these targets were not Arabs, who actually comprise only a small portion of the world’s Muslims.

On February 25, 2013, Kanwaljit Singh’s car was shot six times by American terrorists while driving with his son in Daytona Beach, Florida. He is now in an intensive care unit, and the FBI is investigating the incident as a hate crime. Ten days previous Singh had opened a convenience store at the Port Orange Beach.

On November 18, 2001 in Palermo, New York, a gurdwara (Sikh place of worship) named Gobind Sadan, named after the 10<sup>th</sup> Guru, was attacked by three teenagers who thought that it meant “Go bin Laden.” On December 10, 2001, Surinder Singh Sidhu was badly beaten by two men armed with 4-foot metal poles yelling “We’ll kill bin Laden today.” While in the hospital, Sidhu said that he was wearing an American flag turban to show his patriotism.

On August 5, 2012, at a Sikh temple in Oak Creek, Wisconsin, Wade Michael Page shot six to death and wounded four others and then took his own life. Page, who was covered in white supremacist tattoos, was an army veteran with ties to neo-Nazi organizations. He was, in a word, an American terrorist.

Amardeep Singh, son of one of the victims said: “We forgave Page because otherwise it would have been a thorn in our side for the rest of our lives.” Since then there have been no demands for revenge; rather, the Sikhs are calling for unity, reconciliation, and a better understanding of their unique and vibrant faith.

### **The Religious Tolerance of the Sikh Gurus**

During his morning bath in the Sein River of the Indian Punjab, Guru Nanak (1469-1539) claimed that he was taken up into the presence of God for three days. Just like some of the Hebrew prophets, he very reluctantly took on the role of prophet. The essence of Nanak’s message of redemption was “There is neither Hindu nor Muslim.” This did not mean that there were only Sikhs, because the Sikhs considered themselves Hindus until the 19<sup>th</sup> Century.

Gobind Singh, the 10<sup>th</sup> Sikh Guru, wrote that “someone is Hindu and someone a Muslim, but all the human beings are recognized as one and the same. Thus worship the one Lord, who is the common enlightener of all; all have been created in His Image. The temple and the mosque are the same, there is no difference between a Hindu worship and Muslim prayer.”

The Sikh scriptures contain hymns written by both Muslim and Hindu authors. A Muslim saint laid the foundation stone of the Sikh Golden Temple in Amritsar, and Hindus worshipped there until the late 19<sup>th</sup> Century, when the Sikhs gradually established their own religious identity.

The Sikhs have a long tradition of honoring martyrs who were tortured and executed by India's Mughal emperors. The following is a decree by Emperor Bahadur Shah: "The disciples of Nanak are to be slaughtered in every place that they are found." A Sikh head was worth 25 rupees and the reward for a live Sikh was four times as much.

### **No Religious Violence during the Sikh Empire (1799-1839)**

Today Sikh militants will argue that the violence that they have committed is justified self-defense in the face of oppression by the Mughals, the Afghans, the British, and the Indian government. The Golden Temple was destroyed by Mughal armies in 1736, by the Afghans in 1757, and then the Indian army badly damaged it in 1984. In each case the attacks were planned, incredibly enough, on Baisakhi, the Sikh's holiest day.

During the reign of Ranjit Singh (1799-1839), Sikh authority extended from the Punjab to Kashmir, a good portion of Northwest India. Unlike the rule of the Muslim Mughals, Sikhism was not made the official religion of this nation, and Muslims and Hindus were members of the administration and army. As opposed to the practice of many Hindu and Muslim militants (today or in centuries previous), no one was killed because of their faith and no temples or mosques were destroyed during this Sikh Golden Age.

### **The Rise of Sikh Nationalism**

The British believed that the Sikhs and Nepal's Gurkas were the only "manly races" in South Asia. From 1845-49 the British East Indian Company fought two wars against the Sikhs, and although they fought bravely with American mercenary aid, the British won and annexed the Punjab. This defeat festered for decades among the members of this once proud nation.

In addition to being promoted in the British military, the Sikhs were also encouraged, mainly by the British, to separate themselves from Hindus. For many Sikhs this unfortunately led to a religious nationalism that included beliefs in one church (*gurdwaras* whitewashed of previous Hindu influence), one people (Sikhs living in a Punjabi-speaking state, which they achieved in 1966), one "pure" scripture, and one immutable, transcendent God (purged of Hindu pantheism and polytheism). My research has convinced me that when religious and national identities are fused, there is bound to be religiously motivated violence.

### **The Storming of the Golden Temple and Its Aftermath**

In the late 1970s and early 1980s India's Congress Party saw trouble on two fronts—the rise of a sometimes violent Hindu nationalism on one hand, and the Akali Dal, a nonviolent Sikh political party that was insisting on more political autonomy in the Punjab. Congress decided to support Sikh extremists in the same way that the CIA and Israel financed the militant Hamas against the more moderate Palestine Liberation

Organization. The main difference from the PLO was that the Akali Dal had no history of violence.

Just like our initial support for Osama bin Laden, the Congress Party supported Sikh militant Jarnail Singh Bhindranwale. He quickly realized that he was being used, so he called for targeted assassinations of Indian political leaders. The government of Indira Gandhi was legitimately concerned, but in desperation she committed one of the greatest blunders of her already controversial career. On the night of June 5, 1984, she ordered the storming of the Golden Temple.

In addition to hundreds of heavily armed militants inside, there were thousands of pilgrims in and around the temple complex. Also incredible was the fact that tanks and artillery were used by the Indian army in a “shock and awe” attack. Government accounts of civilian deaths were in the hundreds, but thousands were most likely killed. A sacred library containing manuscripts with the Gurus’ signatures was also destroyed.

After the assassination of Indira Gandhi by her Sikh bodyguards later that month, an estimated 5,000 Sikhs lost their lives in pogroms across the country, mostly in New Delhi, where 200 gurdwaras (temples) were also burned down.

Nine commissions were set up to bring the perpetrators to justice, but there was no action until 2005, when Prime Minister Manmohan Singh, himself a Sikh, declared: “On behalf of our government, on behalf of the entire people of this country, I bow my head in shame that such a thing took place. I have no hesitation in apologizing to the Sikh community.”

### **Sikhs do not Support their Militant Few**

A large majority of Sikhs do not support violent action, and they are frustrated and embarrassed by Sikh extremists, many with much foreign support, who still try to stir up trouble. (As with the Irish rebels, Sikh militants have received help from fellow countrymen around the world.) We need to remind ourselves that over a billion Muslims are also upset by the few militants that sully the name of Islam.

Some have asked Sikh men why they don’t just take off their turbans. (A few Sikh women wear turbans but most simply cover their hair.) This is equivalent to asking Christians to take off their cross necklaces, except that the Sikh religion is the only faith that demands that men conceal their uncut hair in cloth. The Sikhs consider the hair to be a divine gift and as such it may not be cut. As in the biblical story of Samson, Sikh men also believe that their hair is a source of their power.

In December of 1992 I took the train to Chandigarh to study Gandhi at Punjab University. I had been warned not to go by my friends in Bangalore, because Sikh and Muslim militants were still active in Northwest India. On the train I meant two Hindu men who, after kidding me that I looked like Bill Clinton (I don’t), admitted that they were wearing turbans to be on the safe side during their visit.

After seeing Indian soldiers at nearly every intersection in the Punjabi capital Chandigarh, I decided not to visit the Golden Temple nor some famous Hindu temples farther north in Kashmir. The tension has now eased considerably, so I intend to visit these places on my next trip to India.

I close with a warning to those who want to protect our nation against the imposition of Shariah Law: the man you see in public wearing a turban is a Sikh not a Muslim.

Nick Gier taught religion and philosophy at the University of Idaho for 31 years. He is writing a book “The Origins of Religious Violence: An Asian Perspective,” and draft chapters can be read at [www.class.uidaho.edu/ngier/orv.htm](http://www.class.uidaho.edu/ngier/orv.htm).