

Visit to the Gurdwara

I first became aware of Sikhs when Prime Minister Ghandi was assassinated by two of her bodyguards who happened to be Sikhs. I was struck by their colorful turbans, baggy pants and long beards and actually thought the two assassins were twins, until my uncle explained to me that it is the way people in that religion dressed. Life's hassles made me forget about them, until last year's shooting at a Gurdwara in Wisconsin. So for a school project I decided to visit a Gurdwara. I approached a Sikh named S- (another customer) at the Taj Mahal Restaurant in Albuquerque, explained my situation to him and he agreed to let me accompany him for a service. On the agreed date, I was sick and could not make it, so we had to reschedule. On the rescheduled date I was still not well and I was coughing. Since time was of the essence and I did not feel like interrupting the service with my coughs, we planned on a tour instead of a service.

I had never seen a Gurdwara in real life, just pictures from the internet, so when I saw the Gurdwara, I was disappointed. Actually, I drove past it thinking it was a car workshop, until I saw the unique looking S- in a blue turban standing outside and it dawned on me where I was. We greeted each other. I noticed a yellow flag flying outside with a symbol of a sword straight in the middle and arching swords to the left and right of it. Inside the arching sword was a circle. Sahib told me the flag is Nishan Sahib and it is found outside every Gurdwara. The symbol is the Sikh symbol khanda, portraying the power of God, and the arching swords are miri and piri. The straight sword or throwing sword as S- called it is chakra, meaning God is eternal. We went inside, to the lobby where soothing Sikh music was playing. S- gave me a head cover to put on. We removed our shoes and put them on a shoe rack, and then I followed his example of washing my hands at a sink. From class readings I knew this has to be done as a sign of respect. There were a few people in the lobby and S- introduced me to them and explained the purpose of my visit. They were very nice and invited me back to attend a real service when I felt better. Suddenly I felt out of place among these beautifully, colorfully dressed Sikhs in their colorful turbans and saris, wearing bracelets. Thankfully I knew I had to take my sandals off, so had taken care of my feet and nails before coming. I liked the turbans and vowed to try one on even if I had to buy one.

We went into the prayer room, which is a huge hall with no furniture. The floors were covered with beautiful material (not carpet like in the mosque), and in the middle was a corduroy (I think) material from the back to the front with gold trimmings. There were some men sitting on the floor on the right side and some women sitting on the floor on the left side. The corduroy path led to a structure like a palanquin with a canopy. The structure and the canopy was so beautifully decorated that as soon as I entered the prayer room, my whole attention was focused on it. Truthfully, I do not remember the color of the floor materials that is why I did not mention it. There was a man sitting behind the palanquin, gently swinging a huge fan that looked like it was made from a horse's tail over the palanquin. S- jolted me back to earth when he said that is where Guru Granth Sahib sits. He went on to tell me who Guru Granth Sahib is, and the story about how and why the Holy Scripture is the guru. He explained to me that since the Guru is their leader, the Guru must be treated like a king. That is why there is someone sitting behind the Guru Granth Sahib fanning it with a chauri (fan) under a chandoa (canopy). I wondered why fan the Guru Granth Sahib with a chauri, which I doubt can gather a lot of air, instead of a fan like the Chinese use. Then I remembered my girlfriend returning from her visit to India with a chauri in her luggage, and telling me it was for swatting away flies. Even though there were no flies here, by custom, that is what the Sikhs have always done. They could also use an electric fan if it were about comfort from the heat. I understood. It was about prestige.

We went closer to the canopy and S- bowed down in front of the Guru Granth Sahib, put money in a money box (Golak), walked clockwise around the palanquin and bowed down again in front of the Guru Granth Sahib. I followed his example hoping to catch a glimpse of the Guru Granth Sahib in the Manji Sahib (seat for the guru), but unfortunately it was covered with a cloth known as Rumalla. On the Rumalla, I saw the Sikh symbol and what looked like weapons. My thought was, was that man fanning the guru also doubling as a bodyguard?

We sat on the floor cross-legged since it was disrespectful for one's feet to be pointed in the direct of the Guru Granth Sahib. S- explained to me that the money is donations (not required) for the needy and for maintenance of the Gurdwara. He explained to me that in the Gurdwara, one's thought should always be pure and focused on the scriptures, that is why men and women sit apart. He showed me the ragis (a smaller less decorated stage) where the musicians sit. He also showed me rooms where people read the Holy Scriptures continuously in shifts on special occasions for akhand path. As we left the prayer room, we bowed again.

S- then took me to another room known as the langar where he introduced me to some people and re-introduced me to some I had met earlier. There were people (some Sikh, others not) sitting on the floor (the carpeted part) cross-legged, eating. There is a kitchen area where the food is prepared and a buffet-like area where it is served. S- explained to me that people of all racial, social, and ethnic backgrounds are always welcomed without discrimination to the Gurdwara to worship and eat. I asked if one has to worship first before they can eat? He replied, "No. You can come and eat anytime you want without ever coming in to worship." He also told me they cater for a lot of the homeless. He also explained that the food is vegetarian so as not to offend people who do not eat certain foods, such as pig for the

Muslims and cow for Hindus. Every duty performed in the Gurdwara is voluntary, whether in the kitchen or fanning the guru. After trying some of the food I thanked S- for his help and hospitality, promised to observe a service after my finals, got my sandals and left.

I felt like I had just walked out of an old Indian movie. All those beautiful colors made my church look plain. Every service performed in the Gurdwara was also voluntary.

Even donations were voluntary and the Sikhs still had enough money after maintenance to feed the needy? What has my church been doing with the collection money they extract from the congregation? I use the word extract, because after the congregation has willingly given, the pastor still stays on the microphone and use the guilt thing to talk people out of their Big Mac money. In short you will leave my church broke after the three collections sent around by the ushers with the choir supporting them with beautiful gospel music in the background.

I do not remember my church inviting the homeless for a snack. I do not remember the Catholics, Jews and Muslims trying to extract money from their congregation during my visit. The more I thought about my visit, the angrier I became with Christian leadership. Everything about Christian leadership is about money. On my drive home, I vowed not to give another collection in a Christian church for at least twelve years since by my math, I have already contributed for that many years.