CHAPTER 51

NEW DIRECTIONS IN
SIKH STUDIES

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INTRODUCTION

On Sunday morning, 5 August 2012, a gunman burst into the Sikh Gurdwara in Oak Creek, Wisconsin and opened fire, killing five men and one woman, ambushing one police officer and injuring three others. During an exchange of gunfire he eventually died of a self-inflicted gunshot wound to the head after he was shot by another police officer. The dominant narrative that has emerged in both media coverage and public discourse since then has been one of mistaken religious identity. It presumes that the killer, identified as a white supremacist named Wade Michael Page, may have shot the Sikhs because he ignorantly believed they were Muslim. To a certain extent, such a storyline seems accurate because hundreds of times since the terrorist attacks of 9/11, Sikhs have been the victims of horrific attacks like this. On 15 September 2001, for instance, Balbir Singh Sodhi was shot dead in Phoenix, Arizona, by a self-described ‘patriot’ who mistook him for a Muslim. Again, Surinder Singh and Gurmej Atwal were gunned down by yet-unidentified assailants during their afternoon stroll in Elk Grove on 4 March 2011. And several other Sikh Americans have felt the wrath of insane hatred, such as 56-year-old Sacramento cab driver Harbhajan Singh, who received multiple facial fractures from two of his passengers on 29 November 2010 (M. Kaur 2012). The perpetrators of such crimes have invariably assumed that because Sikhs wear turbans and have beards they are Muslims, even specifically Taliban. How terrible it is that it has taken the slayings in Wisconsin to serve as a national teachable moment about Sikh beliefs and practices. Yet the ‘mistaken identity’ narrative carries with it an unexamined premise, implying that somehow the public would have reacted differently had Page turned his gun on Muslims attending a mosque and that ‘such a crime would be more explicable, more easily rationalized, less worthy of moral outrage’ (Freedman 2012). Thus there is an urgent need to abandon the ‘mistaken identity’ narrative because it misses
the bigger picture of ending violence against all innocent people—Muslim, Sikh, and anyone else—and building a global society without terror.

The second narrative is offered by Mark Juergensmeyer who maintains that the killing spree by Wade Michael Page on the Sikh gurdwara in Milwaukee was an act of Christian terrorism. Accordingly, Page was a member of the skinhead band ‘End Apathy’ that advertised the evils of multiculturalism and advocated ‘white power.’ The author contends that it is fair to call Page a Christian terrorist since the evidence indicates that he thought he was defending the purity of white Christian society against the evils of multiculturalism that allow non-white non-Christians an equal role in American society. Like the Oklahoma City bomber Timothy McVeigh and the Norwegian militant Anders Breivik, Page thought he was killing to save white Christian society (Juergensmeyer 2012). However, no evidence has become available so far to show that Page was indeed a pious Christian. This is true of many religious terrorists who use religion only as a cover for their evil purposes.

The third narrative is related to the process of building Sikh institutions in America. Its protagonist, Laurie L. Patton, argues that when one or two Sikhs lived in a town, they may have been the town’s ‘quirky’ exceptions, the strangers that were token symbols of tolerance. But when a community of Sikhs began to gather amongst themselves, and to build buildings, they could easily become different kinds of targets of hate crimes. They became group targets by virtue of the fact that they were, indeed, now no longer an exception, but an integrated thread in the larger fabric of the town. As a result, and especially after a tragedy, each minority religious community that suffers discrimination must pay a cultural tax—the extra burden of educating the rest of the country about its traditions, its rituals, and its cultures. To be sure, this is part of the bedrock upon which American society is built. Minority religious communities should have the right and freedom to represent themselves and their traditions—however, wherever, and whenever they choose. But something is deeply wrong when the burden remains exclusively on the community itself to conduct all of the outreach, to articulate its values and defend its contributions to the rest of society. And, there is a deep isolation, not to mention exhaustion, in that ‘cultural tax’—especially after a tragedy (Patton 2012). It is, however, instructive to underline the fact that the building of gurdwaras is not a recent phenomenon, considering the presence of over two hundred gurdwaras adorning the American religious landscape. Sikhs are actually celebrating the hundredth anniversary of the first gurdwara in Stockton, California that was built in 1912.

The fourth narrative relates to the Sikh response to this unprecedented tragedy, reflecting the collective activities of ‘gathering the ashes, washing the floors, rebuilding the knocked down walls and domes, and moving forward’ (Mann and Shah 2012). It is based on the Sikh ‘spirit of optimism’ (charhi kala) in the face of brutal violence, emphasizing healing and forgiveness instead of retribution for the shooting rampage by an army veteran with a white supremacist background. Unsurprisingly, standing in front of a row of people holding signs that spelled ‘practice peace,’ Oak Creek Police Chief John Edwards remarked: ‘In 28 years of law enforcement, I have seen a lot of hate.
I have seen a lot of revenge. I’ve seen a lot of anger. What I saw, particularly from the Sikh community this week was compassion, concern, support. What I didn’t see was hate. I did not see revenge. I didn’t see any of that. And in law enforcement that’s unusual to not see that reaction to something like this. I want you all to understand how unique that is’ (McGreevy 2012). Sikhs around the world have come together in a rare act of unity. They have organized vigils across the country, opening the doors of gurdwaras so that people of different faiths can join them in mourning and solidarity. They have offered prayers for the welfare of all (sarbat da bhalu): ‘In thy will, O Lord, May peace and prosperity come to one and all.’ A new generation of Sikh Americans has emerged to provide leadership in the public arena. Emboldened by the legacy of sacrifice, service, and resilience that permeates Sikh history, they are carrying a torch passed on to them by their elders (V. Kaur 2012). Stressing the need to understand the little-known faith of Sikh Americans as an integral part of the history of the United States, Diana L. Eck has remarked that ‘it is important to know that Sikhs share three distinctly and deeply American values—the importance of hard work, a commitment to human equality, and the practice of neighborly hospitality’ (Eck 2012).

In sum, the kind of national attention that has turned to the Sikh community is phenomenal. It has already made Sikhs and their traditions topics of widespread interest in the media and to the public at large. On 8 September 2012 California Governor Jerry Brown signed law protecting Sikhs and other ethnic groups from workplace bias: ‘This bill, AB 1964, makes it very clear that wearing any type of religious clothing or hairstyle, particularly such as Sikhs do, that that is protected by law and nobody can discriminate against you because of that,’ Brown told some 400 Sikhs and supporters at a rally of the North American Punjabi Association on the steps of the Capitol. He also signed SB 1540, which requires the state Board of Education to consider a new history framework for schools that the governor said will include ‘the role and contributions of the Sikh community in California’ (McGreevy 2012). Brown reiterated that education can blunt hatred, prejudice, and fatal misunderstandings, such as the massacre of Sikhs outside a Wisconsin temple. Thus the positive outcome of Wisconsin tragedy will certainly be reflected in an increased focus on the Sikh tradition in the academy. Let us now turn to the history of the discipline of Sikh Studies and find answers to some probing questions to set new directions. In particular, the questions that need to be addressed here include: Can the Oak Creek Gurdwara tragedy indeed become the turning point in the study of the Sikh tradition as 9/11 triggered the study of Islam and Muslim societies in the world? What are the necessary research languages that should be mastered to study the literature of the Sikh tradition? Is it significant to identify, locate, and preserve the original manuscripts in the Gurmukhi script scattered throughout the various regions of Punjab and some other provinces of India? Is there an urgent need to translate the primary sources in the widely accessible English language? How do we interpret the sources to create a meaningful perspective? Do we need to adopt interdisciplinary approaches in the study of the Sikh tradition to keep pace with developments in other fields of study?