

*“Was Teresa May right when she said Sikh values are “values we need more than ever as we forge a new ambitious role for Britain in the world”*

On the 13th April 2017, during the festival of Baisakhi, Theresa May lauded Sikh values and their potential for a post-Brexit world. In many ways this was an ironic twist, as it was during the very same festival 98 years prior that British Colonial forces massacred up to 1000 Indians in the Punjab. Yet the progression of British attitudes towards Sikhism and its values has been long overdue; the recognition of their tolerance and equality is more than just preferential to creating a modern Britain, it is *essential*. Theresa May was therefore entirely correct when she stated they are needed more than ever, for their practical application can supplement Britain as a world leader. Yet it is also important to note that under her current government she has consistently failed to uphold such values and has instead pursued divisive programmes which undermine her statement. This creates a disparity between the government’s words on Sikhism, and the actions they actually take.

In order to assess the veracity of Theresa May’s claims, one must first define the values she refers to. The name Sikh roughly translates as “seeker of truth” and this offers a general guide for the religion’s values, held by an estimated 25 million people worldwide<sup>1</sup>. Yet despite being the world’s fifth largest religion<sup>2</sup>, Sikhism is one of the globe’s youngest, with its founder Guru Nanak born in 1469. The principles of Sikhism hold all people to be equal, due to God himself being within all and as such everyone being capable of change. Guru Nanak summed this up as “*Just as fragrance is in the flower, and reflection is in the mirror, in just the same way, God is within you*”<sup>3</sup>. While God is in all, Sikhs aspire to avoid building barriers against him in their lives, through “*truthful living*”<sup>4</sup>. This involves avoiding the five vices- lust, greed, material attachment, anger, pride- and maintaining the three duties- praying (Nam Japna), working (Kirt Krna), giving (Vand Chhakna). To a non-Sikh this may appear somewhat confusing, but the pivotal message spread by Guru Nanak was “Ek Ong Kar” meaning ‘we are one’. This highlights the ultimate tenet of Sikhism: equality, from which all other teachings stem and this teaching is by which this essay will focus on.

Having outlined the values associated with the Sikh religion, one must understand how these could be adopted and implemented in a modern Britain. The emphasis of Sikhism on equality is arguably its greatest asset in this respect. Indeed, many of Britain’s most significant achievements rest upon the keystone of equality. Legislation such as the Human Rights Act<sup>5</sup> and the Equalities Act<sup>6</sup> are testament to this, enshrining in law that all citizens are equal and offering remedies to combat discrimination. Furthermore, other aspects of British society which are often taken for granted can be directly traced to the notion of equitability. The National Health Service and welfare state created by the Labour government of 1945 personifies these, offering care from ‘cradle to grave’ for all, regardless of income. Such attainments directly link to the concept of Vand Chhakna by giving back to the community through joint efforts. They also avoid the vices of lust and greed by preventing the cumulation of wealth in too few hands by redistributing resources to aid those with fewer financial means. One may therefore see the Britain of today as already being built upon Sikh values. This is not necessarily because such programmes have been pursued with Sikh values in mind, as Britain is only just beginning to realise the contributions that Sikhism has to offer. It was, after all, only at the 2017 election that the first turban wearing Sikh was elected to Parliament. Rather, it is that the welfare policies of the past have overlapped positively with Sikh beliefs. That the key beliefs of Sikhism share qualities with some of Britain’s greatest national achievements is a clear indicator of their promise in shaping the nation positively.

---

<sup>1</sup> Sikh American Legal Defence and Education Fund

<sup>2</sup> *ibid*

<sup>3</sup> Guru Granth Sahib

<sup>4</sup> Bbc.co.uk. (2018). BBC - Religions - Sikhism: Sikh Beliefs. [online] Available at: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/religion/religions/sikhism/beliefs/beliefs.shtml> [Accessed 1 Aug. 2018].

<sup>5</sup> Human Rights Act (1998)

<sup>6</sup> Equalities Act (2010)

With past achievements in mind, it becomes clear that in the post-Brexit age Britain is suffering from a slipping relevance. From the former US president suggesting the nation would be ‘back of the queue’<sup>7</sup> to numerous companies moving their bases elsewhere, Britain has dropped evermore from the international stage. This is alongside a worrying change in attitudes nationally, with increases in hate crimes and suggestions of intolerance threatening the nation’s diverse, modern, multicultural outlook. Besides this, arms sales to nations engaged in unethical wars- such as the Saudi Arabian campaign in Yemen- are an indictment of a nation which does not care what direction it takes. Alongside the uncertainty of Brexit, it leaves Britain’s place in the world unknown, with the possibility that the globe’s 5th largest economy may slip into irrelevance. Britain therefore requires a new mission in the world, needing to forge a new position or else risk obsolescence. Yet it is essential that such growth be paired with an ethical approach, for in the 21st century this is absolutely vital to improving the lives of those at home and abroad. The value of Sikhism is that with proper application it can achieve both of these goals.

It is in this context that the statement by Theresa May must be considered, as even if she were not considering these factors they undeniably play a role in the need for Sikh values. The quote relates to a *new ambitious role* for Britain- the potential that Sikhism can bring in the future, which can solve this malaise that hangs over the nation. This potential can be split into the application nationally, and internationally. In taking the latter first, Sikhism could have a considerably positive effect on international relations. If one were to take Sikh values and exerts them in this way, an ethical foreign policy could be adapted which treats all states as equals and helps the oppressed. This could be achieved through increasing the Foreign Aid Budget, which has been under threat for many years from populist tabloid anger. This budget uses a relatively small amount of the revenue of Britain, as a wealthy country, and provides it to nations globally which are desperately in need. Ergo, despite using a proportionally small amount of the budget, it achieves a significant amount in helping less economically developed countries and their populations. In increasing the amount given to these nations Britain would show its commitment to helping the less fortunate world-wide and aiding the understanding that God is in all of us; for if we are all truly equal in this way it is only logical that we help others as we would wish to be helped ourselves. Furthermore, such action would link directly to the symbolism behind the ‘Kirpan’- the ceremonial sword all Sikh men must wear. The reasoning for this is to symbolise the protection of the oppressed and combat injustice. What better way would there be for Britain to symbolise its commitment to such values than to persecute poverty and injustice around the globe- all without resorting to violence. This would take upon the imagery of Sikhism as a soldier against inequality and pursue actions to make this a reality. Such a foreign policy would prove ambitious in its change from recent actions in Iraq and Afghanistan and lead Britain towards a place on the international stage which is forged through peace and understanding rather than violence. Pursuing an ethical foreign policy along the teachings of Sikhism would also achieve the joint goal of raising Britain’s position in the world- as Theresa May defines it as ‘ambitious’- by raising recognition of the good that could be done and setting it apart from other major world powers.

This remains ambitious, with the Guru Granth Sahib quoting “*The true path to God lies in the service of our fellow beings*” exposing the failure of Britain in recent times to achieve such an ethical approach. As the migrant crisis has threatened to overwhelm Europe, only around 10,000 Syrian refugees taken in<sup>8</sup> with Britain lagging far behind many other European nations such as Germany which has hosted close to 530,000<sup>9</sup>. This is all despite being one of the wealthiest countries in the world. As such, Britain has the means to accommodate the implementation of the above values, but lacks the motivation. This is not to say Sikh values have not been exemplified in certain aspects of British foreign policy. Only this month was it announced that British troops would be deployed to Africa to train local groups in recognising female equality<sup>10</sup> and the risk of sexual exploitation, with the aim of increasing female participation. In doing so, the

---

<sup>7</sup> Speech by Obama, B. (2016)

<sup>8</sup> BBC News. (2018). *Reality Check: Where have the Syrian refugees gone?*. [online] Available at: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-43826163> [Accessed 31 Aug. 2018].

<sup>9</sup> DW.com (2018). *Refugee numbers in Germany dropped dramatically in 2017* | DW | 16.01.2018. [online] DW.COM. Available at: <https://www.dw.com/en/refugee-numbers-in-germany-dropped-dramatically-in-2017/a-42162223> [Accessed 2 Aug. 2018]

<sup>10</sup> GOV.UK. (2018). *British Military steps up Women, Peace and Security efforts*. [online] Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/british-military-steps-up-women-peace-and-security-efforts> [Accessed 3 Aug. 2018].

Sikh central value of equality is exemplified by treating those abroad as we would wish to be ourselves, and helping them push forward to improve quality of life. Using British funds to aid the lives of vulnerable people elsewhere, and helping them to create a sustainable future free from harm directly compares to Sikh beliefs. The challenge remains in turning these singular policies into a much broader ethical foreign strategy and making them the lynchpin of politics.

Sikh values are also entirely necessary on the national stage, as equality must be brought about at home as well as abroad. Although this may seem like a broad subject it has very specific applications. In regards to the justice system, this applies to upholding the rule of law and maintaining equality between parties and the burden of proof. Recent developments in regards to employment tribunal fees<sup>11</sup> have indicated how such values are ever under threat. As symbolised by the Kara- a steel bracelet- Sikhs must be resolute and firm in the place of pressure. In application to the justice system this means upholding such values in the face of populism and pressure, as to do so ensures equality between all. This includes upholding and enforcing the rule of law, including the aspects contained within such as presumption of innocence and burden of proof.

The argument of this essay is that Sikh values are not only favourable, but *essential* to forging a role for modern Britain. Due to this, the issue arises as to whether a strong, open Britain could be created without the need for Sikhism. It is true to say that past advances have been brought about without explicit reference to Sikh values. It is highly unlikely that in creating such noble projects such as the NHS the government were considering Sikh theology, as Britain was a far less diverse nation at such a time. As achievements such as the welfare state and equality legislation were attained without reference to Sikhism, this would suggest that an equally beneficial future could also be created without this. Nevertheless, such an argument is flawed, as although Sikh values were not necessarily considered, the ethics behind past advancements is entirely shared with the religion. Whilst aspects like Ek Ong Kar were not the inspiration for the welfare state or other laudable aspects, it would be impossible to create a positive new role for Britain which did not exemplify the type of equality that Sikhism teaches. Therefore Sikh values will always be entirely necessary for the creation of a new, positive, Britain as they inherently value equality themselves. Thus to pursue equality is to pursue Sikh values.

In line with these values, Theresa May's comments appear entirely hypocritical. On the one hand she very rightly lauds the strength of Sikh values, however on the other she pursues a programme of austerity that cuts valuable services protecting equality. Her attack on the justice system has seen its budget cut by almost a third<sup>12</sup> and with this the courts estate in a state of disrepair and criminal barristers striking over poor pay conditions<sup>13</sup>. Arguably, the industrial action by barristers around the country was emblematic of the serious issues present in the system, with advocates warning that unless pay was increased there was a very real risk of lawyers being unable to afford to represent the poorest in society. This has the effect of denying justice to the most vulnerable, who cannot afford to pay privately for lawyers, and creates a two-tiered justice system where the only guarantee of fairness is economic status. This wholeheartedly undermines the rule of law and with it the central doctrine of equality under Sikhism. If there is a variation of treatment in the justice system then this can only be incompatible with the key tenets of Sikh belief and cannot amount to the protection of the weak and strength to remain resolute to injustice. Conservative cuts to other services across the board have led to an exponential increase in the use of foodbanks, which has now topped over 1 million people. This is an abject failure to personify the belief that God is within all, as it treats those less fortunate with contempt. Sikhism's key values are to care for those less fortunate as they are one's equals; the current climate of austerity directly contradicts these aspects.

It remains undoubtedly positive that a Prime Minister has acknowledged the very real qualities Sikh theology can bring to a modern Britain. This is dually for the improvements this could bring in policy- both at home and abroad- but also because so few people are aware of the realities of Sikhism. In an ever-more diverse Britain in order to promote cultural harmony and improve the nation's multicultural outlook it is vital that more people gain a better understanding of other religions. This is especially in light of the rise in hate

---

<sup>11</sup> R (on the application of UNISON) (Appellant) v Lord Chancellor (Respondent) [2017] UKSC 51

<sup>12</sup> Hyde, J. and Fouzder, M. (2018). *MoJ reveals massive budget cut as new advice deserts open*. [online] Law Society Gazette. Available at: <https://www.lawgazette.co.uk/news/moj-reveals-massive-budget-cut-as-new-advice-deserts-open-/5063763.article> [Accessed 16 Aug. 2018].

<sup>13</sup> BBC News. (2018). *Barristers to strike over 'relentless cuts'*. [online] Available at: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-43594546> [Accessed 31 Aug. 2018].

crimes since the 2016 referendum. Yet this must be balanced with the very real consequences of her government's actions behind her words. As such, Theresa May's actions undermine her words. She adopts Sikh values in name only, attempting to use their positive qualities to create a veneer of legitimacy over her government. This facade becomes blatantly obvious with even the lightest examination of her parliamentary record, with the red herring of her political spin crumbling under the lightest of touches. If Theresa May truly wanted to foster a greater place for Sikhism in Britain, almost a century after arguably the most destructive force to relations between the two, then she would have pursued the values she claimed were needed. That she has not only failed to do so, but has moved in entirely the other direction is a damning indictment of the Conservative party in 2018.

Ultimately, Theresa May's statement was entirely true. Sikh values offer a unique and accepting approach in themselves, able to foster the equality and understanding that Britain requires after several tumultuous years and the ability to improve knowledge of other cultures and belief systems existent in a multicultural, modern society. Moreover, if they were to be applied to British foreign policy then an ethical approach could be developed that would establish the nation as a world-leader in aid and helping those less fortunate around the globe. If combined with a national strategy which ended austerity and prioritised aiding the vulnerable in society then Britain could truly be a nation which could be proud of its actions towards individuals. These aspects would both meet the Sikh values of protecting the vulnerable, staying away from vice and above all maintaining equality as God is within all. Unfortunately for those who hold such values, the current Conservative government has acted entirely at odds with these routes and has instead acted against the very principles she so exulted. The conclusion that can be drawn from this is that although the Prime Minister's statement was correct, it may require another administration to turn such words into reality.

*Harrison Burroughs*

## **Bibliography**

Guru Granth Sahib

Sikh American Legal Defence and Education Fund

Human Rights Act (1998)

Equalities Act (2010)

Speech by Obama, B. (2016)

Bbc.co.uk. (2018). BBC - Religions - Sikhism: Sikh Beliefs. [online] Available at: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/religion/religions/sikhism/beliefs/beliefs.shtml> [Accessed 1 Aug. 2018].

DW.com (2018). *Refugee numbers in Germany dropped dramatically in 2017* | DW | 16.01.2018. [online] DW.COM. Available at: <https://www.dw.com/en/refugee-numbers-in-germany-dropped-dramatically-in-2017/a-42162223> [Accessed 2 Aug. 2018].

GOV.UK. (2018). *British Military steps up Women, Peace and Security efforts*. [online] Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/british-military-steps-up-women-peace-and-security-efforts> [Accessed 3 Aug. 2018].

R (on the application of UNISON) (Appellant) v Lord Chancellor (Respondent) [2017] UKSC 51

Hyde, J. and Fouzder, M. (2018). *MoJ reveals massive budget cut as new advice deserts open*. [online] Law Society Gazette. Available at: <https://www.lawgazette.co.uk/news/moj-reveals-massive-budget-cut-as-new-advice-deserts-open-/5063763.article> [Accessed 16 Aug. 2018].

BBC News. (2018). *Barristers to strike over 'relentless cuts'*. [online] Available at: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-43594546> [Accessed 31 Aug. 2018].

BBC News. (2018). *Reality Check: Where have the Syrian refugees gone?*. [online] Available at: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-43826163> [Accessed 31 Aug. 2018].