



My Daughter's Sikh Wedding

by Jonathan Aitken

MY ELDEST DAUGHTER has just married a Sikh at the Golden Temple in Amritsar. I am rejoicing in the happiness of the newlyweds and have visited them at their matrimonial home in the foothills of the Himalayas. I enjoy the company of my new son-in-law, who is fast expanding my spiritual horizons. For he is deeply committed to his faith and serves it by working as a *giani* or teacher at the Golden Temple. My daughter Alexandra has

converted to his religion. She now wears the traditional *Pag* or turban, carries the ceremonial *Kirpan* or miniature dagger, and meditates with her husband for several hours a day at the temple. All this is quite a cultural shock for her rapidly aging father, but as all wise men know there are no limits to the capacity of our daughters to surprise us. So I am now on a learning curve about Sikhs and Sikhism.

Considering it is one of the world's leading religions, I was, until a few weeks ago, abysmally ignorant about Sikhism.

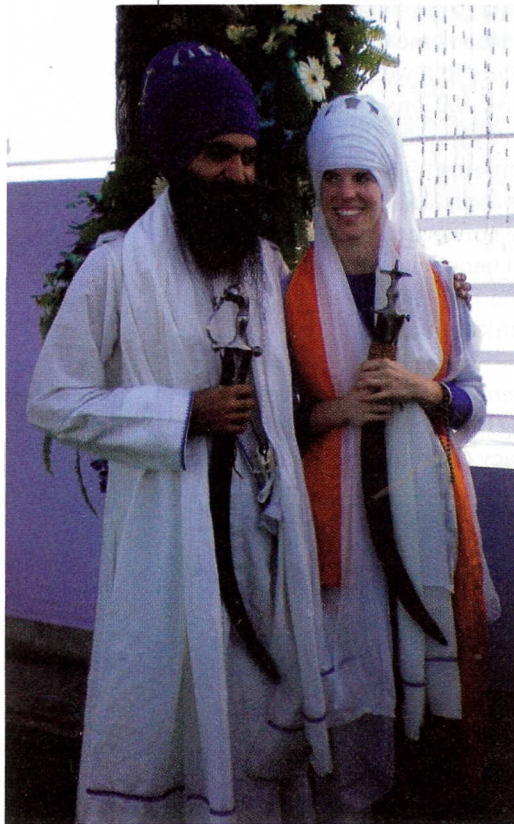
Since I suspect my lack of knowledge is shared by most *TAS* readers, perhaps a few first impressions of Sikh culture and faith may be of interest.

The word *Sikh* means a learner or disciple. They are followers of 10 holy Gurus who were the founding fathers of their faith. The religion is often said to derive partly from Hinduism and partly from Islam, but this is a Western oversimplification because its scriptures are distinctive from those of other faiths.

Media stereotypes are quite a problem for Sikhs, who are sometimes falsely portrayed in the West as male chauvinists and militaristic terrorists. Fortunately (from a new father-in-law's point of view) these images are nonsensical. Whatever messages the outward symbols of Sikhism may convey to uninitiated observers, the core theology of the Sikh scriptures is peaceful, hospitable, prayerful, and dedicated to the ideals of community service and family love.

The British tabloids have made merry with their reporting of my daughter's marriage, partly because both bride and bridegroom look as though they have stepped straight from central casting at Bollywood. But what seems exotic in a Western magazine is standard practice in the Punjab. This is the state of north India where 80 percent of the world's 25 million Sikhs come from. There are also growing Sikh communities in Los Angeles, London, and other international cities.

The outward signs of Sikhism are known as the Five Ks, which stand for *Kesh* (uncut hair), *Kangha* (comb), *Kirpan* (dagger), *Kach* (cotton breeches), and *Kara* (metal bangle). To this should be added the turban. Although not in the traditional list of the Five Ks, wearing the turban is regarded as an essential commitment to the faith and has become syn-



onymous with Sikhism. However, millions of Sikhs (including my son-in-law, Inderjot, before he became a devout follower) are short-haired, clean-shaven, and turbanless.

Inderjot is from the *Nihang* tradition of the *Khalsa* Sikh group. In shorthand terms this means he is a noble warrior. But the *Nihang* traditions of riding into battle with sabers pointed have long since faded into history. These days the wearing of the miniature dagger or *Kirpan* symbolizes a spiritual willingness to cut out the evil parts of one's bad character. Perhaps we all need to be equipped with a *Kirpan*, though preferably not when passing through airport security.

ON MY VISIT TO AMRITSAR I made several visits to *Harmandir Sahib*. This is the headquarters of Sikhism, better known to the world as the Golden Temple. To enter its sacred precincts all visitors are required to cover their heads and uncover their feet. The barefoot walk on the marble promenade around the holy lake that circumscribes the temple felt mighty chilly to your High Spirits columnist, but when in Rome...

Being escorted around the Golden Temple by Inderjot and Alexandra bore some resemblance to touring the Vatican with a couple of immensely enthusiastic guides who wished to share their encyclopedic knowledge of theology at every icon, mural, picture, tombstone, or shrine along the route. So I learned a lot in a short time. One of the most interesting discoveries was the emphasis placed by the *Gurbani* (sayings of the Gurus) on divine grace or *Karam*. This gift of God's mercy and forgiveness is a concept that has deep affinity with Christianity, although this was a faith the Sikh Gurus never encountered in their journeyings and searchings.

Although Sikh theology and spiritual history seem rather dense to a newcomer, two or three key points stand out.

First, the Sikhs have suffered throughout their history from terrible persecution, often extending to appalling torture and massacres at the hands of other religions of the region. The tales from the martyrs' room in the Golden Temple make Nero's persecution of the early Christians seem rather mild by comparison.

Secondly, Sikhs are people of serious spiritual discipline. Devoted followers of the Gurus' regime rise every morning at 3 a.m. to say the five dawn prayers, beginning with the rhythmic chanting of

Japagi or song of the soul. They practice extensive meditation and daily readings from the 1,430 volumes of sacred scriptures known as the *Guru Granth Sahib*, the combined wisdom of the Gurus. These scriptures explain the Sikh concept of God as the all-knowing, all-seeing, ever-present creator who is the ultimate reality and the source of all truth.

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The scriptures also lay down many spiritual and practical rules for a good Sikh lifestyle. These include guidelines for diet, exercise, and behavior, including a requirement to give 10 percent of one's income to charity and to devote 10 percent of one's waking hours to serving the poor.

At the Golden Temple there is much prominence given to *Langar*, a core feature of the Sikh life. This is the provision and sharing of free food to all comers, regardless of rank or status. I was impressed by my son-in-law's dedication to his *Langar* duties in the kitchens of the temple where he and a well-drilled team serve soup and bread to some 30,000 poor and hungry Amritsar locals each day.

After five days in the holy city and the Golden Temple I only know how little I still know about Sikhism. Its values seem admirable and are based on a most practical combination of faith and good works. So I shall try to learn more, not least about the religion's teachings on family life, which are of great interest to a father-in-law. In the meantime I can see that my daughter is blissfully happy. She says she has married "the kindest man in the world." For these blessings I gladly give thanks to both the Sikh and the Christian God. ❁

Jonathan Aitken is most recently the author of *Nazarbayev* and the *Making of Kazakhstan: From Communism to Capitalism (Continuum)*. His biographies include *Nixon: A Life (Regnery)*, *Charles W. Colson: A Life Redeemed (Doubleday)*, and *John Newton: From Disgrace to Amazing Grace (Crossway)*.