

Service 20130414 Sikhism and Unitarianism
Using the Eighth Service of Orders of Worship 1932

Chalice Lighting

To say Wahe means wonderful, magnificent and astounding, and is an outer understanding of the majesty of God. Guru means God within ourselves because it comes from Gu, darkness, and ru is from light (or lightness). Lighting the chalice today, let us say Wahaguru, *mean* Wahaguru and let Wahaguru come into our subconsciouses.

Light the chalice.

I thus light the chalice, to let the naming of the wonderful, magnificent and astounding come out of the darkness and into the light.

God the Supreme Guru, open thou our lips so that our mouths shall show forth thy praise. O come let us sing; let us make a joyful noise; let us bring grace to the fore. O come let us worship and bow down; let us sit and meditate. For we are a community of the faithful, accepting the demand to worship deeply and provide service to one another.

God consciousness joins God. This is the sweet nectar of Naam or naming. It is transmitted by the Shabad, or divine word, just as the supreme Guru demonstrates Divine Light.

Hymn SF 116 Breslau choir

The first hymn, hymn 116, was chosen purely randomly. Without looking at it, I simply flipped through the book, stopped the pages and chose the hymn. This is similar to how the Sikh chooses the daily reading from their one holy book, the Adi Granth, otherwise called the Guru Granth Sahib. The random hymn relates well to the theme today, both by stressing singing and the importance of the word. Furthermore, on the very last line, the notion that a hymn can be a prayer I extend to mean that a hymn can be also be a scripture. If a hymn is a scripture then it is like the Sikhs' own holy book filled with hymns and poetry. Thus we sing hymn 116, *Let Now Our Voices Raise*, to the tune Breslau.

Explanation

April 14th, today, this year, is Baisakhi, Guru Nanak's birthday, forming the Sikh New Year, the day that, traditionally, Sikhs choose to enter the Khalsa or

the community for adult men and women that signifies their commitment to the faith. It is also the day that Sikhs wash the flagpole outside the gurdwara and replace the flag itself, the nishan sahib, containing the Sikh symbol of the khanda or double swords. Sikhism is the fifth largest world religion, with 19 million adherents in India, half a million in Britain and less than half a million elsewhere. It was formed at the turn of the 1500s and spread in Western and central India at a time of Mughal influence and came under the ongoing attempt by Muslims to squash the new faith. The final human Guru, Guru Gobind Singh, was assassinated in 1708, but not before he gave Guruhood jointly to the holy book and to the Khalsa, the community.

Guru Nanak was the first Guru. This poet and philosopher, who made a deep study of Hinduism and Islam, said that people should be distinguished by what they did, and by their individual qualities, and not by externals like pilgrimages, penances, and spiritually inspired poverty. Sikhs believe in karma and reincarnation, but free of caste and elaborate rituals; there is one God and not a pantheon of Gods, and one scripture in the Guru Granth Sahib. The soul is changed by meditating on God's name. The food, given in every Gurdwara after every service, as the third Guru Amar Das formalised, is blessed as an offering on those who both give and receive.

Liturgical Prayers

If we say we have no defects, then we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us; but if we realise our defects, and commit to moral standing, then grace works to make us faithful and forgiving between one another.

The unrighteous one should amend his or her thoughts and meditate on the naming of God, for God's nectar will impact and pardon abundantly.

Supreme Guru, unto whom all hearts open, all desires calm, and where there are no secrets, cleanse the thoughts of our hearts, generating perfect love through the magnification of thy holy name. Amen.

A prayer by Guru Arjan placed in the Adi Granth [used for the installation of the holy book in the home].

Blessed is the hour when I see you
I am glad to be in your presence
You are the giver of my life, my beloved God;
I maintain my whole being by keeping you in mind.
Your teaching is true, your word is sweet,
Your eyes see everything, you are calmness itself.

Your patience is the source of my peace,
Your Law is unchanging, my Sovereign.
My God is beyond birth and death.

A [Collect](#) for Morning, being the first part of the Daily Hukamnama from Amritsar last Wednesday.

I am satisfied and satiated, eating the food of Truth. With my mind, body and tongue, I meditate on the Naam, the Name of the Lord. Life, spiritual life, is in the Lord. Spiritual life consists of chanting the Lord's Name in the Saadh Sangat, the Company of the Holy.

[Lord's Prayer to music based on Albert Hay Malotte's](#)

There is nothing inconsistent between *The Lord's Prayer* and that of Sikh belief - indeed the Jewish prophet said, "hallowed be thy name." So we are invited to give the prayer and to music.

[Reading](#)

The *Mool Mantra*, the fundamental creed of the Sikh, says that: God is one; God is creator; God is immanent in creation; God does not fear; God does not hate; God is truth; God is outside time; God has no form; God is not born; God does not die; God is known by the grace of the Guru.

[Hymn SF 020 Gonfalon Royal](#), *Come All Who Look to God Today*.

[Liturgical Prayers](#)

Jesus said: The first of all the commandments is 'Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God is One Lord; and thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind, and with all thy strength.' This is the first and great commandment.

Write these words in our hearts, O God, we beseech thee.

And the second is like, namely this, 'Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself.' There is none other commandment greater than these.

Write these words in our hearts, O God, we beseech thee.

All things therefore whatsoever ye would that men should do unto you, even so do ye also unto them; for this is the law and the prophets.

Write these words in our hearts, O God, we beseech thee.

This is my commandment, that ye love one another, even as I have loved you.

Write these words in our hearts, O God, We beseech thee.

If ye know these things, blessed are ye if ye do them.

O God of pure nectar: Let us see favourably your reforming faiths, in their expositions of wonderful and sacred mystery, so that they display your providence and carry out in tranquillity their access to your salvation; let the whole world see and know that which was cast down can be raised up, and what has grown old can be made new, and all things brought to their perfection by the perfection of pure spirit.

To our God, the One of all mercies, we as servants give a most humble and heartfelt thanks for all goodness and loving-kindness. We are blessed for life, its preservation and its ongoing, and know that what we put in we may receive; we are thankful for the means of grace, and for the hope of glory. And for that thankfulness we show forth praise, not only with our lips, but in our lives; by giving up ourselves to service, and by attempting to walk in holiness and righteousness. Pour into our hearts that most excellent nectar of charity, the very bond of peace, and of all virtues, without which a person alive may be counted spiritually dead: All this is for mercy's sake.

Intercessions

Let us pray for people of faith.

From whom cometh every good and perfect gift; send down upon all ministers or granthis and servants or sewarders, a true faithfulness, whether in the Sikh community or in our own communities, or among people of goodwill, and let all congregations or sangats receive the healthful spirit of grace and be truly pleased, receiving the continual dew of thy blessing. We pray especially today for the Sikh ceremony of Baisakhi, and for the gathering of the Unitarian General Assembly.

The Fountain of all goodness, we humbly beseech thee to bless those who have charge of government and political wisdom, that they *do* pay heed to the prayer of St. Francis, so that they take away all hatred and prejudice, and whatsoever else may hinder us all from godly union and concord: that, as

there is but one body, and one spirit, so we may henceforth be all of one heart, and of one soul, united in one holy bond of truth and peace, of faith and charity.

The Preserver of the essences of humankind and other animals, we commend all those who are in any ways afflicted, or distressed, in mind, body, or estate (especially those for whom our prayers are desired); that they may be comforted and relieved, according to their necessities, giving them patience under their sufferings, and a happy issue out of all their afflictions. And we pray for those who have gone before us, and on whose shoulders we stand. Defend us from all assaults of our enemies, that our defence is just, and is only towards a true destiny of peace. Vouchsafe to give us, in the fullness, love and grace.

Grant us in this world the knowledge of thy truth, and in all life to come.
Amen.

[Chaurasia Bansuri Flute](#) Let us pray as this music flows.

[Hymn SF 092 St Bernard 02](#) *Let Us Renew Our Covenant*; this is a hymn as we consider the Unitarian gathering at Nottingham.

Sermon

A sermon is not a place to do a kind of religious education introduction to the Sikh faith. Each of us can do that ourselves. Rather, I wish to make some comparisons and contrasts between Unitarian stances and those of the Sikh faith.

Sikhism is a what might be called a 'put right' religion, that's to say it is originally reformist about something else, something to which it both relates and frees itself from, and thus becomes its own entity. The background of the Sikh faith was a reformist approach with both Hinduism and Islam but has broken free of both. Unitarianism has an ambiguous relationship with Christianity, in putting it right, so to speak, and arguably separating from it.

From the 1200s to the 1400s there was an active Sant tradition in northern India that was monotheistic, rejected the outward show of religion, and rejected sectarianism whether Hindu or Muslim. Caste and sex were irrelevant regarding salvation. A man called Kabir, a poor weaver and yet a poet, born in 1440 and died in 1518, opposed idolatry and caste and regarded Muslim and Hindu as equally under the one God. Nanak, born 1469

and died in 1539, took up this position vigorously. In his thirties he received a revelation that there was neither Hindu path nor Muslim path but God's path, and Nanak spoke as a Guru or revealer of God's message. Into the one scripture went Kabir's poetry, Hindu and Muslim content, the hymns and ideas of the first five and the tenth Gurus, and so Sikhism is both syncretistic and critical of its influences.

You could say that Unitarianism has a syncretistic background, but it treats its content, especially Christianity and humanism, and now Eastern and Pagan forms, with its own twist, its own built-in criticisms, its own changes of meaning, into a highly individualist approach to faith. Sikhs and Unitarians have been able to draw on outside traditions and yet develop a different religious culture. Buddhists, for example, make the argument that when we borrow their detailed material we put it out of context and change its overall meaning.

The Sikhs had ten human Gurus, but for the Sikh the supreme Guru is always God, known through the revealed teaching or word. Even traditional Unitarianism, with Jesus as its revelatory Guru, considered that he was but a human Guru and that the supreme Guru is God. Today Unitarianism is more obviously plural on these matters whereas the Sikhs own their own Gurus. Unitarianism's internal Gurus, like Faustus Socinus and Francis David, or Joseph Priestley and James Martineau, are not regarded as having revelatory status, but nevertheless we have important people who are marker posts along the way of faith and what some might call progressive revelation. Sikhism is also a progressive revelation, and understands itself as going beyond the Hindu and the Islamic.

The Sikh is not interested in finding the proper direction of worship, as in the Muslim Qibla. Muslims may argue against Paganism, but is it not a little Pagan for Muslims in worship to face a piece of black space-rock placed in a box that the Muslim's call the Ka'bah, located in Makkah? Sikhs reject imaginary stories about Abraham establishing the Ka'bah and the magical waters of Zam Zam that saved his son, that lead people on Hajj to circle the Ka'bah and run seven times between two hills. But Sikhs are interested in the transcendence of God found in Islam, the God that is entirely God.

Nevertheless, we can be critical of Sikhs. Shoes are taken off and all male and female heads are covered before they go into a Gurdwara's Diwan or worship room, and feet should not be placed in the direction of the Guru Granth Sahib. The holy book is placed on cushions and under a canopy, which is surely a form of outward show, and when carried above the head this is surely ritual. When you get married, you become married after walking

around the Guru Granth Sahib four times. That is ritual! Plus, the book is opened randomly for a daily reading, which we might regard as magical even Pagan. We might criticise too the outward show of wearing the five ks as worn by the Sikhs who join the Khalsa - having Kesh, or long uncut hair (for strength and saintliness), keeping the Kanga: a small comb to tidy hair (for cleanliness), attaching the Kirpan: a sword for protection (signifying bravery), wearing the Kara: a steel bracelet (indicating everlasting love for God) and putting on the Kuchcha: or the underpants (to signify purity).

Sikhs after all do go on pilgrimages. They like to visit the Golden Temple at Amritsar and indeed will go to Nanded in central India where the final human Guru Gobind Singh was assassinated. Unitarians have few outward appearances and rarely go on pilgrimages. Well, we in Hull occasionally visit the grave of Leonard Chamberlain out at Rowley, west of Hull.

What the Sikhs will say is that, unlike the Hajj, and unlike the Qibla, and unlike the decorative nature of panentheistic and polytheistic Hinduism, none of these appearances are essential to salvation: rather, they derive from having respect towards God, the human Gurus, the holy book and the community. This is why Sikhs value cleanliness before worship.

So what is essential for the Sikh? One of the main essentials is the langar, or the community diner. After a service a small portion of sweet food called karah parshad is handed out by one of the sewadars. This is a fairly ritual-free communion, is it not? Then people go into the community dining area, the langar hall, where food is available free of charge for all and regardless of any religion. Although Sikhs can eat meat, respect for animals means that the langar is vegetarian.

Unitarians have largely dropped formal communions, with attempts at other rituals like the flower communion. But we often mark important meetings with food afterwards. Now there will be a communion at the General Assembly, but it is not a central celebration of worship. The kara parshad, like an after-communion, is much more important for Sikhs, and the langar is essential.

Arguably Unitarians could do with more in the way of symbolism and art and not less. Our Puritan shadow is long and dark. Sikhs do not mind depicting their human Gurus in art and, of course, the holy book, the Guru Granth Sahib, is beautiful in presentation and treated with great reverence. Although even a box room in a house can be a family gurdwara (gateway to God) where the holy book is held, you would not have a gurdwara in a room where people were walking through.

And the holy book on special occasions is read through: it can take upward of 48 hours. The Adi Granth achieved Guru status in 1708. I am arguing, perhaps against the Sikh view, that it gets treated magically: but *they* say God speaks through a random opening and reading of the book or through a complete reading. This contrasts with Catholic Christians who follow a year-long lectionary that intends to cover the most significant areas of a holy book. Perhaps Unitarians are more interested in sermons: recently, James Barry gave the longest lasting sermon in the world: on Monday 30th July 2012 he completed 31 hours, but that was to just to raise money for Unitarian youth, Send a child to Hucklow and Ditchling Unitarians. We prefer 15 to 20 minutes. Do Unitarians have a holy book? No, our syncretism of content stretches out into many books. Unitarians are instead highly selective about what we read. The Adi Granth had material added by successive Gurus, and then the final human Guru gave the book the status of a Guru in 1708.

But we did once read the Bible rationally. Socinians and early Unitarians used to read the Bible with what was called ordinary comprehension, lifting its understanding directly off the page. You cannot find the doctrine of the Trinity in the Bible, and even John's Gospel treats the divine Jesus as subservient to the Father. Later Unitarians, however, adopted German biblical criticism that became more commonplace in academia. But for Sikhs the book speaks to you through its poetry and via the music. You can go on the main Sikh website and look at the reading for today in Amritsar. Each day the book is opened at random and the shabad there becomes the day's Hukam (meaning command). This random method has existed since the Golden Temple was established in 1604.

There is a strong emphasis on hymns in the Adi Granth. In some ways, contemporary Unitarian faith is identified from its hymns. The quickest way to describe Unitarianism to someone is to give them the hymn books. Of course the difference is that we have kept changing our hymn books whereas the Guru Granth Sahib became fixed after the passing of the final human Guru.

The other ongoing Guru, as well as the book, is the community, or the Khalsa. Today, 14th April, is the day that many Sikhs make the decisive act of joining the Khalsa, which means they take on the ethical obligation of being a defender of the faith.

If the Khalsa shares in the ongoing Guru, is it then like the Body of Christ in the Christian Church? Most Unitarians don't share the idea that their Church is part of the body of Christ, although some Free Christians do claim it is part of the universal Church. This is quite a disagreement among Unitarians! And, of course, most Christians do not accept that the Unitarian Church is part of

the body of Christ. Arguably the Khalsa is closer to the Unitarian view of Church and divinity. Guruhood is a manifestation of God, not an incarnation. Sikhs like Unitarians would regard incarnation as something much broader.

Nor is the Khalsa, a body for Sikhs to join, like an elite monastery, for a spiritual elite. It is rather a decision for commitment that is both ethical and to defend the faith. The Khalsa is a body of laity and its Guru nature is of a theology that God manifests in the community. Surely Unitarianism is a manifestation of spirituality and quite egalitarian.

Indeed, we can compare their ministers and ours. Sikhs have ministers called granthi. Any man or woman can be a granthi. Someone respectable, who perhaps looks after the Gurdwara, who teaches children, who perhaps writes in the Sikh's own developed language of Gurmukhi, can be a granthi. Anyone can be a sewardar, or servant. It is noticeable that Unitarianism has dropped ordination as a common rite for its ministers. It is more difficult to get on to the General Assembly roll of ministers than to be a granthi, but here are essentially two lay led movements.

Sikhism is so very communal: in fact one could argue that it displays elements of religious communism, especially with the langar, as did our Puritan forebears when setting up communities in America, although the Puritans in England were often merchants and then their commercial privileges gave way to the individualist capitalists of liberal ideology. We Unitarians are religious expressions of Western individualism and the Sikhs most definitely are not. They defend their communities.

The Khalsa function is seen in the Sikh's main symbol, in approved existence from 1920. Just as we have adopted the flaming chalice, the Sikhs have the symbol of the khanda, and it is two outward swords, a circle, and one inner double-edged sword. The outer swords represent the spiritual and worldly together, the inner double-edged sword means freedom and justice, and the circle is the one God without beginning or end. Sikhs like Unitarians grew up in the face of opposition, and as a last resort Sikhs defended themselves from Muslims; we Unitarians faced riots at the time of the French Revolution, and perhaps were weak in defence and even ran away: Joseph Priestley escaped to America. We also went up in the world: we entered into local government and then the national parliament - after all, it's what saved our trust deeds, like the Leonard Chamberlain Trust. Only York lost its money obtained from the Puritan Lady Hewley.

Sikhs are more like Unitarians than Quakers, because they want to speak, play music and sing. So do we. Also like us, the ethical is as strong as the

theological, although their theology remains more revelatory and co-ordinated than our subjective human-upwards theology.

So there we are. There is no overwhelming conclusion to this comparison. You might come to different conclusions. I have been suggesting that Unitarians and Sikhs at least deal in progressive revelation, that we both are syncretistic and put our own spins on the used material, and that there is a strong emphasis in both approaches of the ethical over the theological. But there are differences too, so the Sikh has a stronger emphasis on community, that the kitchen-diner is a vital tool of openness and access, and that Sikh's stress on the nectar of God through naming God is more revelatory than the Unitarian's more plural, human-level viewpoint. We have less outward show than the Sikhs, although to be fair they do not regard outward show as essential for salvation. Salvation, after all, is based on the grace of God and no other, and for Unitarians salvation is something of a mystery.

[Collection](#) and [Notices](#)

[Hymn SF 030 Middleton choir](#), *Each Seeking Faith is Seeking Light*.

[Benediction](#)

The Protector of all that trust in thee, without whom nothing is strong, nothing is holy: increase and multiply upon us thy mercy; that, thou being both ruler and guide, we may so pass through things temporal that we lose not the things eternal. Grant this, O Supreme Guru.

Grant, Supreme Guru, without beginning or end, that the words which we have heard this day with our outward ears may, through thy grace, be so grafted inwardly in our hearts, that they may bring forth in us the fruit of good living, to the honour and praise of thy holy naam. Amen.