



THE RACIALIZATION OF MINORITIZED RELIGIOUS IDENTITY: CONSTRUCTING SACRED SITES AT THE INTERSECTION OF WHITE AND CHRISTIAN SUPREMACY

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INTRODUCTION

Among the most dynamic sources of diversity in the United States is that emanating from the numerous religious groups that are flourishing under the relative religious freedom offered by this country. While there cannot be an official state religion in the United States, Christianity has historically been given unofficial sanction and privilege in virtually every sphere of American life. Resulting from this long tradition of Christian dominance is a strong sense of entitlement and xenophobic entrenchment in significant and powerful sections of the population.

In 1997, Henry Jordan of the South Carolina Board of Education retorted to those who objected to a prominent display of the Ten Commandments in the State's public schools: "Screw the Buddhists and kill the Muslims." Jordan later explained his strong reaction in the following manner: "I was expressing frustration.... [Schools] can teach any kind of cult. Buddhism is a cult. So is Islam. I'm getting a little tired of it." Meanwhile, undeterred by the opposition of these "cultists," Nebraska Governor Benjamin Nelson proclaimed May 17 of the same year "March for Jesus Day."¹

And in August 2001, Rep. Don Davis, a white, Republican state legislator in North Carolina, forwarded via email a letter to every member of the state House and Senate that stated:

“Two things made this country great: White men & Christianity... Every problem that has arisen [sic] can be directly traced back to our departure from God’s Law and the disenfranchisement of White men.”²

While he later distanced himself from the remarks, Davis initially explained his reason for forwarding the email as: “There’s a lot of it that’s truth, the way I see it. Who came to this country first—the white man—didn’t he? That’s who made this country great.”

As evidenced by these examples, religion has become a particularly powerful method of classifying the “enemy” or “other” in national life in recent years, impacting primarily non-Christian people of color. For instance, Muslims have become among the most demonized members of the American polity, as a result of international events and domestic actions by a miniscule handful of their co-religionists. In return, their religion has repeatedly been characterized in an inaccurate, misleading, and blatantly racist fashion in the media and public discourse; their property and religious sites have been vandalized; and their bodies have been targeted for hate crimes in alarming numbers. As the venerable scholar Edward Said has noted, the last sanctioned racism in the United States is that directed at followers of the religion of Islam.³

The validity of this statement was evident in March of 2000, when Reverend Jerry Falwell, a powerful and influential Christian minister with a national following, told a religion website that “the Moslem faith teaches hate.”⁴ He later tried to clarify his comments by claiming that he was referring to any group “bearing any bigotry toward any human,” apparently failing to see the irony in his “clarification,” in which he specifically cited the Aryan Nations and the Church of Scientology as examples of such prejudiced groups.

Noting this paradox and highlighting some possible consequences of Reverend Falwell’s bias-laden discourse, Omar Ahmad of the Council on American-Islamic Relations faxed a letter to Falwell in which he explained that “These offensive remarks are symptomatic of the very intolerance that you claim Islam promotes.... Your destructive rhetoric could lead to discrimination and even physical attacks against Muslims.”⁵ The violent, racist backlash mentioned by Mr. Ahmad has recurred across the nation in the wake of the Iranian Hostage Crisis, the Gulf War, and the terrorist attacks upon Oklahoma City, the World Trade Center, and the Pentagon.

The notion of the “Muslim terrorist” is one powerfully etched on the minds of most Americans. The blatant racism behind this characterization, which goes unquestioned even by the intelligentsia in American society, can

be gleaned from the complete dearth of depictions of the perpetrators of the Oklahoma City Federal Building bombing, abortion clinic bombers, and various white militia groups, as “Christian terrorists.” When such acts are perpetrated by white Americans, the specificity of their religious affiliation is neither a matter of newsworthiness nor comment. The utilization of the term “terrorist” enables the facile dehumanization of the targets of that pejorative by the press and the public.

Analogously, Sikh migrants to the United States—who most Americans find indistinguishable from Muslims—have found themselves the target of racist scapegoating and media misrepresentations. The ruinous and recurring depiction of the “Sikh terrorist” was revived most recently when most of the country’s major media outlets mistakenly reported that a plane hijacked in India had been seized by Sikhs.⁶ Although many media outlets later apologized and printed corrections in the wake of this erroneous accusation, the hurtful initial reports only confirmed the validity of the siege mentality many Sikh Americans feel on many levels. They believe that they are second-class citizens not only because of their racial background, their accents, and their lack of English proficiency, but also because of the religion they practice. This is an especially disquieting notion to Sikhs, because a number of them came to the United States to escape the religious persecution suffered by the tiny Sikh minority in India.

The new society into which Sikh immigrants have transplanted their culture, once they perceive as hostile and forbidding to their cultural traditions, has racialized them as a result of their ostensible “racial uniform,”⁷ which in the case of the Sikhs is also a religious uniform. This conflation of racial and religious identity has further convoluted the already demanding attempts of Sikh Americans to develop and crystallize a diasporic identity—one intensely informed and complicated by transnational factors—efficacious for themselves, and communicable to American society at large. The intersections of white supremacy and Christian supremacy have made the integration of Sikh Americans into the Republic all the more formidable a task.

In a fervent attempt to cling to the most salient aspects of their religio-historical identity, Sikhs have built a *gurdwara* (Sikh temple) wherever they have migrated. This has become a source of conflict in a number of communities around the country in the past three decades since Sikhs started arriving in the United States in large numbers. As a case study in this trend, I will examine the recent struggle of the Sikh community in San Jose, California to build a new *gurdwara*, and the highly racially-charged objections of members of the local community that opposed the construction of the new sacred site. I will examine the racialized and xenophobic aspects to the opposition of certain

members of the surrounding community, linking the situation in San Jose to other struggles by Asian Americans seeking to build places of worship.

XENOPHOBIA AND OPPOSITION TO THE CONSTRUCTION OF SACRED SPACES

Silicon Valley has attracted a sizable number of Sikh Americans in the past two decades. The remarkably diverse population of the area contains sizable Sikh American and South Asian American communities, many of whom work in various sectors of the high-tech industry that propels the region's economy. However, the Sikhs in the area are visible not only behind computer terminals and in the boardrooms of computer companies, but behind the wheels of taxi cabs and the counters of convenience stores and gas stations. Their visibility and sizable presence, as well as the broad mixture of racial and ethnic groups in the vicinity of San Jose, would seem to make the likelihood of the Sikh community facing resistance in their attempt to construct a sacred site unlikely.

However, San Jose, like the rest of the nation, remains highly segregated along racial lines. The Sikhs sought to locate their new *gurdwara* in an affluent, primarily white neighborhood, and consequently became viewed as a threat by some of the residents of the locale. The visible presence of the Sikhs in the community evidently was the basis of some residents' desire to prevent them from entering their neighborhood in large numbers—a fact that became painfully evident during the contentious approval process for the new *gurdwara*. Nevertheless, the progressive political atmosphere in the region, as well as the general emphasis on supporting diversity by City officials and numerous faith-based community leaders, became a tremendous boon to the Sikh community as they sought support for the *gurdwara* project from non-Sikh members of the community. They formed a far-reaching coalition of political, community, and faith-based leaders in support of their cause—one that was the source of vigorous and often bitter contestation and confrontation.

The July 31, 1997 edition of the *San Jose Mercury News*, carried an article entitled "Residents Protest Temple Plans," which began with the following lines:

People who live near a proposed Sikh temple in San Jose's Evergreen foothills packed a city hearing Wednesday to complain about the size of the sprawling structure, which some have dubbed the "Taj Mahal of the West." Opponents said the temple, however beautiful, will increase traffic and ruin the tranquility of their semi-rural neighborhood. Some fear

that the giant onion-domed facility, to be built on a 40-acre apricot orchard... will become a regional tourist attraction.⁸

This instance, when examined closely, resembles many other such conflicts faced by Sikhs, Muslims, Buddhists, Hindus, Jains, and members of other minority religions throughout the United States. The friction often boils down to a situation in which the Constitutionally-guaranteed religious freedoms of an easily differentiated, racialized community of Asian Americans are trampled by “mainstream” opponents seeking to abridge their right to build a site in which to peacefully worship and practice their religious and cultural heritage. The arguments put forth by the opponents of the construction of such sacred sites are often no more than thinly-veiled, xenophobic opposition to members of a non-Christian, racialized minority entering their community in sizable numbers. The problems faced by the Sikhs in San Jose are a classic illustration of this trend.

Since the *gurdwara* project met all of the City of San Jose’s requirements, the city staff expressed no real opposition to the plans, and it moved quickly through the initial planning stages.⁹ The development of significant community opposition appeared quite suddenly, after the process was well under way to get approval for the building of the new *gurdwara*.

As the date neared for the Planning Commission meeting in which the final approval for the project could be granted, the Sikhs noticed a good deal of activity in the neighborhood. They noticed people in the Evergreen community—a primarily residential enclave in the San Jose foothills, where the Sikh community purchased land on which to construct the new *gurdwara*—getting organized to oppose the project. The Sikhs saw provocative flyers that had been distributed to residents, alerting the neighbors to the impending building of a Sikh Temple.¹⁰

The opposition was led by a local real estate developer who distributed flyers through the neighborhood that attacked the *gurdwara* project. The flyers contained inflammatory statements like “A church the size of K-Mart is coming to the neighborhood, and it will create major traffic problems!” The rising resistance astonished the Sikhs, who had always had cordial relations with members of the surrounding community, although Sikh community leaders later admitted they had been too insular. As a result, the Sikhs were stunned that so many people were suddenly so interested in the project—and that they all viewed it negatively.¹¹

At an August 13, 1997 meeting in the San Jose City Council chambers, city planning official Joseph Herwedel told a standing-room-only crowd of more than 350 people that there was no reason to deny the project approval

from the City. He immediately became the target of “loud boos and murmurs of disapproval from angry area residents.... The meeting was punctuated by shouting and catcalls. ‘Put it in your neighborhood,’ someone from the audience shouted. ‘We don’t want it in our neighborhood.’”¹²

Opponents of the *gurdwara* project vowed to file an appeal with the planning director, and consider a lawsuit if the planning commission upheld the decision. Opposition leader Walter Neal revealed that, “they may seek an injunction based on what they see as an inadequate environmental impact report and traffic study.”

The *gurdwara* opponents put forth five primary reasons for their opposition: 1) the increase in traffic to the *gurdwara* would inundate the neighborhood with cars; 2) noise from the *gurdwara* would disrupt their lives; 3) the architecture would not fit into the neighborhood scheme; 4) the building would be too large and obstruct their view; and 5) tourists would flood the area because of the tremendous beauty of the new *gurdwara*. These ostensible objections were all dismissed by the City’s independent experts as being baseless, because of the numerous special precautions that the Sikh community had taken to accommodate their neighbors.

The Sikh community was shocked by the sudden groundswell of resistance they faced. As a *Mercury News* editorial elucidated, “The Sikh community is ready to pour a fortune into the temple and feel ambushed by the opposition, since it followed all of the city’s rules in developing the plan.”¹³

In order to accommodate their neighbors, the Sikhs had already agreed to putting a cap of 1500 people in the facility at any one time, as well as accepting restrictions on the operating hours of the *gurdwara*.¹⁴ In fact, no other site of worship in San Jose has any such strictures on time of services or size of congregation applied to it. “The limit was termed ‘appalling’ by commissioner Linda Lezotte, and Gloria Chun Hoo said the Sikhs had tried to reach out to the community by even considering it.”¹⁵

Despite all of the assurances and allowances made to prevent Sikh worshippers from having an inordinate impact on the community, the exaggerated fears of Evergreen residents continued to proliferate in the media. Obviously voicing the fears of some of her compatriots, one resident claimed, in a letter published in the *Mercury News*, that, “property values will decline due to large crowds of people loitering in the neighborhood.”¹⁶

Finally, the true basis of a large portion of the opposition was becoming apparent. To assert that Sikhs will “loiter” in the neighborhood such a distance from the large parcel of land on which they have constructed their site of worship is to depict them as a gang, instead of as a highly respected reli-

gious congregation. Imagine the public outrage if the same accusation had been directed against a Judeo-Christian religious group. The racial subtext of this remark raised serious questions about the true motivation behind the opposition's tenacity, something becoming increasingly visible in their discourse of opposition.

Despite the Sikh community's assurances of good intentions and willingness to compromise, as well as numerous evidentiary contradictions presented to refute their concerns, *gurdwara* project opponents continued to proffer illegitimate arguments as the basis of their opposition. The intractable insistence of some Evergreen residents in clinging to discredited arguments certainly seemed informed by their own myopic experiences of attending various churches, and their obvious ignorance about Sikhs and their religious practices—which they may have perceived as something very different from peaceful prayer and hymn-singing that comprises the majority of Sikh religious ceremonies.

In addition, their feelings of uneasiness in dealing with a group of highly visible, ostensibly different, "others" played a conspicuous role in the conflict. But such explanations remain insufficient to explain the persistence of their combative stance. Other factors had to play a role in the failure of reasonable people to appreciate overwhelming evidence from so many independent sources, such as those employed by the City of San Jose, in addition to the good faith promises of the Sikh community.

THE RACIALIZED BASIS OF THE ARGUMENTS AGAINST THE *GURDWARA*

In a nation so obsessed with race, where many major issues of public debate become racially-tinged in some manner, one has to wonder if such impassioned opposition would have been generated if a Christian church of similar proportions were being built on the same property. The comments of some of the residents who oppose the *gurdwara* project bring such a proposition into serious doubt.

While most people—including many in the Evergreen community—cherish the idea of a peaceful site of worship becoming a part of their neighborhood, certain individuals in this particular instance appeared ready to use any excuse to keep the Sikhs out of their community. Dr. Loren Chan Singh sensed racial bias in segments of the opposition, albeit subtle in its use:

On the part of some people, a lot of what they said, I felt, were just code phrases for racism. They made various excuses . . . [for opposing the *gurdwara* project, consisting] of different code words and phrases which

I felt [indicated] some underlying racism. It was always couched in a very diplomatic way.¹⁷

Dr. Gurinder Pal Singh notes that those opposed to the new *gurdwara* seemed determined to prevent the construction of the building, regardless of how much the Sikhs acquiesced to their demands, or offered assurances for their concerns:

Later on, I noticed that they changed their strategy. First they were attacking the purpose of the Temple, saying this is going to be noisy. . . . Then they started saying it is going to be an ugly, monstrous building. Then once other people's opinion came out that it looks like it is going to be a beautiful structure, they said it's going to be a tourist attraction and attract too many people. I saw a constant shift in their pattern of trying to find faults which didn't exist. . . . *I saw things constantly shifting over time.* [emphasis mine]¹⁸

This constant shifting of grievances and proffering of new complaints once previous claims had been assuaged, manifests a powerful indictment of some members of the opposition. Their true dissatisfaction obviously lay in areas other than the ostensible objections they mouthed—and repeatedly changed.

In voicing disapproval towards the construction of the *gurdwara*, opponents of the project repeatedly asserted the absence of any prejudice in their motives. In fact, many of the strongly worded letters to the editor published in the *San Jose Mercury News* by opponents of the *gurdwara* began with explicit disavowals of any racial or religious partiality. A public anti-bias proclamation became almost a prerequisite for anyone criticizing the project:

I am certain that the Sikh community believes that the protest by Evergreen residents is due to racism or, at the very least, a negative cultural bias. ¹⁹

This is not a religious or cultural issue.²⁰

It's not about the Sikhs— it could be another Mormon temple or the Vatican.²¹

"This is not a religious issue," [Jim Zito] said. "This is not a racial issue." . . . [Mr. Zito] wants people to know that his opposition has nothing to do with religion or race.²²

Despite such strident claims, opponents of the *gurdwara* project repeatedly alluded to a violent conflict that had occurred in 1997 at another *gurd-*

wara, about 25 miles away. Using this isolated incident as the basis, they classified *all* Sikhs as inherently violent, and undesirable additions to the neighborhood. In fact, a lengthy piece in the *Mercury News*, focusing on a couple who live next to the parcel on which the *gurdwara* would be built, contained a very pointed reference to this incident, and what it supposedly revealed about the Sikhs in San Jose, and by extension, the entire world.

In their appeal to the city, Jim and Zoe Zito cited past problems at the Sikh temple in Fremont, where members fought each other and police were called in. "The Sikh organization has established a precedent of being undesirable neighbors with incidents involving their temple in Fremont," wrote the Zitios in their appeal.²³

Not only was Mr. Zito's racism laid bare with his words, but so was the fact that he and his wife knew almost nothing concerning the people about whom they had just issued a blanket condemnation. They were apparently unaware that they were slandering members of the fifth largest religion in the world, not some local "organization." Ironically, the article this interview appeared in was entitled: "Sikh Temple Opponents Deny Racist Motives."

The blatantly racist generalization utilized by the Zitios was repeatedly proffered by opponents of the *gurdwara* project. For instance, a letter to the editor published in the *San Jose Mercury News* exclaimed: "This little community is about to be hit by... potential violence from the Sikh temple gatherings."²⁴ Despite the fact that the Sikhs in San Jose had had no such problem whatsoever in the dozen years they had been holding religious services in the area, such rhetoric pervaded the dialogue on the construction of the new *gurdwara*.²⁵ Though sometimes just below the surface of the discourse, the language of race remained a powerful tool with which to publicly denigrate the Sikhs by guilt through racialized association.

In response to such comments, Hindu American Annie Dandavati, who led a group called Evergreen Citizens Coalition which supported the *gurdwara* project, issued a spirited response: "The author referred to the Sikh community as undesirable neighbors and went on to suggest that this entire community was somehow made up of outlaws."²⁶

Ms. Dandavati explained, "there were a few letters that went out to some of the [San Jose] Council members that were pretty racist. . . . I remember the language in one of them. This obviously uneducated person wrote this letter saying, 'I don't want this church to be built there. These Sikh seniors, they walk around like '*crows*' [emphasis added]—because our seniors always walk in the evenings."²⁷ The common habit among South Asians of taking evening strolls apparently disrupted the visual image some Evergreen resi-

dents had of their community. These swarthy immigrants, with “foreign” attire, evidently did not fit into their conception of desirable neighbors.

Echoing the beliefs of the Sikh community and Ms. Dandavati, Elbert Reed, executive director of the African-American Community Service Agency, pointed towards racial motives behind the opposition to the *gurdwara*:

“Whenever there’s a plan for a minority church, there’s always protest. . . . They have done nothing wrong. . . . I think it’s going to be a plus for the community.”²⁸

Confirming the suspicions of the Sikhs and Mr. Reed, Fred Fong, an Asian American member of the opposition, uncomfortably acknowledged that the group included “some prejudiced people,” but insisted that most opposed the temple for “legitimate” reasons.²⁹

Members of the opposition even went to the length of issuing thinly veiled threats in demanding to have the *gurdwara* moved out of their neighborhood. Said one *gurdwara* opponent in a letter published in the *Mercury News*, “The Sikhs have been respected, and accepted, members of our community for many years now. We want to continue this relationship, which is why we are asking them to look for another site for their church.”³⁰ Obviously, she meant that Sikhs would no longer be granted the favor of being “accepted” by the majority community, were they to construct a new *gurdwara* in Evergreen.

Mr. Zito also issued a cryptic warning, one particularly disquieting in light of the hate crimes which have plagued Sikhs and their *gurdwaras* around the country.

Everyone loses if this structure is built as proposed. The community will have a hard time welcoming a group [the Sikhs] which has such disregard for their quality of life.³¹

THE ASCENDANCE OF RACIALIZED LOGIC

Within the safe space created by the company of others who opposed the *gurdwara* project, the explicitly racist sentiments of several Evergreen residents flowed easily—even in the obvious presence of members of the Sikh community of San Jose. Bhupindar S. Dhillon reveals that *gurdwara* opponents expressed their true feelings quite freely in the early community meetings that they organized, but later tempered their language after the Sikhs began highlighting the racism explicit in their dissent. The opponents real-

ized that such blatant racism could quickly backfire on them, and became more sophisticated in their assault.³²

Dr. Tarlochan Singh, Chairman of the *gurdwara's* Public Relations Committee, attended the neighborhood meetings organized by those opposed to the *gurdwara* with his children, and described what he heard:

There were all kinds of racist comments. One white woman came up with a cardboard drawing, with some characters in black, pushing daggers into each others' bodies. She was saying that this is how Sikhs fight in the *gurdwara*. That was the impression she was trying to create. . . . She was basically trying to scare people away, and trying to mislead them with racist stereotypes.³³

Dr. Singh reports one of the most alarming comments he heard at one of these meetings, in which opponents of the *gurdwara* rarely disguised their real target: the Sikhs, not the *gurdwara*.

[Someone] said, "They're going to take over the entire neighborhood, and we want a good mix in the neighborhood. We're going to have to leave and sell our houses."³⁴

This statement indicates the potential for great difficulty in the new millennium for a city as ethnically, religiously, and racially diverse as San Jose. According to census data, in 1999, whites became a minority in the county of Santa Clara, which contains the City of San Jose.³⁵ The racial code words of seeking "diversity" and a "good mixture" in the area barely mask the ugly underside of this statement. It not only raises the ugly specter of white flight, but also attempts to give credence to the racialized image of the inundation of the neighborhood with "hordes" of Sikhs. The stark insinuation is unmistakable: that the Sikhs are unwelcome in the neighborhood, particularly in any sizable numbers.

The most prominent racist incident—and eventually the most damaging to the opposition—occurred at the City Planning Commission meeting, in front of over a thousand people and local news station cameras. A person opposed to the *gurdwara* project carried a large picket sign emblazoned with the words "NO SIKH JOSE." Imagine the outcry if the word 'Sikh' had been replaced with 'Jew' or 'Black.' As it was, an African American professor from San Jose City College, Dr. Merylee Rucker Shelton, saw the placard and reported the rueful incident to the City Human Rights Commission, which later sharply reprimanded the opposition.

Without taking the time to learn anything about their Sikh neighbors or their worship practices, some of the residents of the surrounding community

were ready to believe the worst about this “strange-looking Other” that was “invading” their neighborhood. Echoes of present-day “white flight” resonate loudly here, but that does not fully encompass the problem. The obvious physical differences of the swarthy-skinned, dark-bearded, turban-wearing, sword-carrying, potentially fear-inspiring Sikhs presented a protuberant obstacle to imagining them as fellow citizens of the American polity. The racialization of the situation was veiled only with a very slight veneer of racial code words, and the quickly shifting objections to the *gurdwara* project.

Dr. Tarlochan Singh summarizes the feelings of many Sikhs:

They never said directly that they don't like Sikhs, but that is the overall impression that we have gotten. When someone says, 'We don't know these people.' . . . What else do they need to know about us? We've been living here in the U.S. for about a hundred years. We've been living in this Valley for many, many decades. My grand-uncle came to this country in 1905. . . . He lived in Stockton most of his life.... [He] never went back. And these people say, 'We don't know who they are'? We are human beings like any other people, and we do honest work, we pay taxes, we are law-abiding citizens, and we are very proud to be in America. . . . Simply because we look different [they do not want us here]!³⁶

THE FINAL DECISION

At the hearing at which a final decision was to be handed down by the City Planning Commission, the Sikh community came out en masse in an impressive show of support. Perhaps even more impressive than the over 800 Sikh supporters that turned out that day was the coalition of disparate supporters the Sikh community had patched together. A number of non-Sikh community leaders appeared at the meeting to voice their support of the project, including several Evergreen residents. Annie Dandavati recalls the strength of the broad coalition that had assembled that evening in support of the new *gurdwara*:

We showed up there with a thousand people. I mean, it was awesome! I'd say 800 to 850 were Indians, mostly Sikhs, but Hindus too. And the rest were “mainstream.” We had the Chairman of the local Democratic Party's Central Committee, we had the County Supervisor, we had City Council people. We had a lot of elected officials, we had a lot of com-

munity leaders, Hispanics, African Americans—all our Coalition people. And it was awesome! Everybody came and spoke and they said, this is based on discrimination and ignorance.”³⁷

Dr. Tarlochan Singh tells the touching story of one resident who came out to the Planning Commission meeting, to support her Sikh neighbors:

There was a white woman—she was probably 90 or 95 years old—she came in favor of the Sikhs. She could hardly walk. She was a very old woman. She got a special hair-do on that day . . . and she spoke for a couple minutes and said she supports the Sikhs. It was so nice of her.³⁸

Dr. Gurinder Pal Singh also noted that the presence of non-Sikhs was beneficial to the Sikhs’ cause:

When we went to City Hall, we benefited from a broader effort and the support of a very diverse group, which included Blacks, Hispanics, and other Asian groups. They got a number of politicians to speak in support of the gurdwara. That was very helpful.³⁹

For example, “there was an African American priest who said, ‘I would have an objection if they built the smallest church in the city. It is God’s house. Why should it be small? It should be as big as possible!’”⁴⁰

The following vignette from Dr. Gurinder Pal Singh, nicely sums up the sentiments of the coalition of people who spoke on behalf of the *gurdwara*:

There was a Christian priest who was there of his own accord, not someone who anybody had approached to speak for us. He truly spoke from his heart. He said, ‘How can anybody ever say no to a house of God?’ He also said, ‘I have a congregation of 7000 right in the same area. Why are we discriminating against them? My people come all the way from Salinas in the south and San Francisco in the north (both about 50 miles away). We never have a traffic problem. Why are we limiting them to 1500? Why are they even accepting a limit of 1500? They shouldn’t! . . . Our job isn’t done yet. You can’t have this limit of 1500 imposed on you. If that gets set as a precedent, that would be damaging for all religious organizations. Tomorrow, they can put that on a church, or a mosque, or on anything else, and that should not be allowed. I won’t let that happen.’ And I think he has a point.⁴¹

The Planning Commission of San Jose unanimously approved the *gurdwara* project.

RACE, RELIGION, AND INTER-RACIAL RELATIONS

While the attacks on African American churches in the South during the 1990s eventually drew attention from the nation, the travails of other congregations of color are very rarely heard. For example, in 2000, the Washington-based National Conference of Catholic Bishops concluded that Hispanics are twice as likely as other Catholics in the United States to worship in segregated, separate, and unequal settings.⁴²

Several Asian American religious groups have also faced increasing discomfort from white Christians, a trend that sometimes manifests itself as opposition to attempts by Asian American congregations to construct sites of worship in predominantly white, Christian communities. In Wichita, Kansas, residents of the city attempted to keep a Hindu temple out of their neighborhood, citing parking concerns. Also in 2000, in the Chicago suburb of Palos Heights, the attempt of a Muslim group to purchase a church building and convert it into a mosque met staunch resistance from several members of the community, raising questions of religious bigotry. The 450 Muslim families in the area, most of Arab descent, were told that some city leaders had come out against the project, saying the community should instead buy the church and convert it into much-needed recreation space. The church had been for sale for two years with no previous offer from the city. The City Council even voted to offer the foundation \$200,000 to drop its plans, but the Mayor vetoed the idea, calling it an insult to Muslims. During the furor, some residents of the community declared Christianity the "one true religion" and called Islam a "false religion," statements reminiscent of the arrogance and intolerance often demonstrated in such instances of Christian entrenchment.⁴³

In 1978, a Buddhist group purchased a parcel of land in Hacienda Heights, in the greater Los Angeles area, less than ten miles from Monterey Park, noted for being America's "first suburban Chinatown." Located on a hill, with a picturesque view of the surrounding San Gabriel Valley, it was an ideal site for a temple. "The proposed temple, which they named Hsi Lai Temple ('Coming West Temple'), was designed to attract more believers and to promote cultural exchange between East and West."⁴⁴ But due to vociferous opposition to the temple project from local groups, the temple's construction did not begin until 1986, eight years later.

Neighborhood residents claimed that traffic would become snarled, large numbers of tourists would flood their neighborhood, and housing prices would rise (a truly remarkable point of opposition). Unfortunately, what it came down to in many instances was the fact that "many people did not

want to see the establishment of a Buddhist temple in a largely Christian neighborhood, and some people interpreted the plan for the temple as a racial issue, seeing it as a means for the Chinese to build not only a temple, but to establish a dominant position in their community.”⁴⁵ An issue that was, at heart, a matter of religious freedom, became starkly racialized.

In order to win the public over, Chinese Americans had to resort to measures including Buddhist monks and nuns going “door-to-door explaining their good intentions and the benefits they could bring to the neighborhood,” and a petition drive to help secure permission to build. “In all, there were a total of six public hearings before the plan was finally approved. Hsi Lai Temple, the largest Buddhist monastery in the entire western hemisphere . . . has since become a tourist attraction in the valley, drawing many visitors each year from different parts of the U.S. and the world.” The temple has also generated substantial revenue for local businesses, organized several charity activities, and “a New Year prayer, along with local Christian and Mormon churches, that emphasized the importance of understanding and peace in eliminating racial and religious conflict.”⁴⁶

The xenophobic resistance to the *gurdwara* that arose in San Jose distinctly parallels that which has confronted many other non-Christian congregations of color across the nation. In most of these instances, this antipathy is directed towards a highly visible, racialized minority group seeking to build a sacred site, in an upper-middle class white enclave.

Under most conditions, a site of worship would be welcomed into a neighborhood as an addition that could only enhance the quality of life of the area’s residents, as well as positively affect the values of their property. However, the racialization of the issue prevented a sober, rational appraisal of the situation. In the case of the San Jose *gurdwara*, race became a seminal issue in the discourse of protest, from the general stereotyping of Sikhs as violent, unwelcome additions to the Evergreen community, to the especially egregious display of the “No Sikh Jose” at the City Planning Commission meeting.

As Elbert Reed of the African-American Community Service Agency noted above, people of color often run into what appears to be ostensibly irrational resistance when attempting to construct sites of worship. The rationale becomes much clearer when race is considered as a factor in the consternation with which some communities view such sacred sites. Numerous instances of such conflict have occurred across the country, forcing members of various Asian American groups to contend with the fears of the majority in order to exercise their right to worship as they choose.

The situation in San Jose certainly is not an isolated incidence for Sikh

Americans. In the midst of the problems the San Jose Sikhs were facing regarding the new *gurdwara*, one of the members of the *gurdwara* managing committee received a phone call from a Sikh from New York, who relayed that Sikhs in his local community had experienced very similar problems.⁴⁷ In the fall of 1998, in San Diego, California, the Sikh community engaged in a nearly parallel struggle, with remarkably similar rhetoric being employed by those opposed to the new *gurdwara* being designed as the Sikhs wished.

As with the San Jose case, the racist opposition painted the coming religious institution as an incongruous eyesore that belonged in India instead of an Escondido neighborhood. The comparison to Disneyland was again proffered, as was reference to the Taj Mahal mausoleum, reflecting the stereotypical impressions and limited knowledge of the area's residents about people from India.⁴⁸ The comparison of sacred sites to the aforementioned tourist attractions reflects the manner in which many Americans tend to denigrate non-Christian religions to the status of "cults," as demonstrated earlier by the comments of South Carolina's Henry Jordan. The Orientalist mindset behind this train of thought reduces the religious practices of millions of Americans to mere "spectacle."⁴⁹

Echoing the sentiments of some of the Evergreen residents, one Escondido resident insisted, "We just don't think it is the proper place for it."⁵⁰ Again, the Sikhs publicly suggested that discrimination was a factor behind the problems they were encountering in getting approval for the new *gurdwara* design. An article in the *San Diego Union Tribune* said:

Members of the society say they realize their religion is alien to most people in this country. They also suggest they are the victims of subtle discrimination . . . To buttress their argument, the Sikhs point to the presence of another church, the Apostolic Christian Church, about a block away from their site, as well as the huge commercial area that borders the residential neighborhood to the east.⁵¹

Pardeep Singh, of San Marcos, said the feeling now is that the domes [on the proposed *gurdwara*] are a must. "If the dominant alien culture starts to dictate its values on the rest, then that is nothing short of blatant discrimination," Singh said.⁵²

"If we have a Home Depot in our neighborhood, how much of an eyesore is that?" said Pardeep Singh. . . . "It seems kind of discriminatory if one particular neighborhood doesn't want this because it is the Sikh culture. If this were a Catholic church, I don't think they would have the same concerns."⁵³

In the summer of 2000, white resistance to the construction of a *gurdwara*

in the District of Columbia was described in the following manner by the *Washington Post*:

One hand was hugging the oak tree, the other held a cell phone, while above her a tree cutter in the elevated arm of a bucket truck was getting ready to start lopping branches. "I'm calling the mayor's office!" Beth Schneiderman screamed in a last-second effort to save the trees near her house . . . Her son Daniel, 22, was hugging another oak, and a neighbor was defending a third. When Schneiderman got someone in city hall, she hollered into her phone, "This is an emergency!"⁵⁴

In this instance, environmentalism served as the façade for the opposition of white neighbors, who went to the extent of invading the private property of the Sikhs to register their resentment towards their moving into the neighborhood. Such frenzied reactions by white adherents of Judeo-Christian religions have forced many Asian Americans to reassess the true parameters of religious freedom in this country. They note that they have not done anything illegal or immoral, yet still face such hostility from their white neighbors. They have gone through the proper channels to build their new site of worship, something very near and dear to their hearts, and something that many Sikhs consider a religious obligation.

The *gurdwara* in D.C. would be the first Sikh temple in the nation's capital, located on a small triangle of land the group has owned for 20 years. Said Shamsher Singh, an economist and a leader of the group, "If we did not create something which is aesthetically beautiful there, we as Sikhs would feel ashamed."⁵⁵ He went on to add, "One of the beauties of America is that it guarantees rights for everybody. The neighbors have a right, and so have we. All we are asking is equal treatment."

Echoing the reasonable voices of San Jose city planning officials, "Armando Laurencio, the city's administrator for building and land regulation, said the zoning code gives churches leeway for designs that do not conform with other building types nearby. He said the Sikhs 'are well within their rights to bring the building there.'"⁵⁶ But as in San Jose, opponents of the new *gurdwara* employed highly charged rhetoric in denouncing the Sikh sacred site:

"Don't citizens count?... We live here, and this is the quality of life of the citizens of the District of Columbia, and we must have rights."

The neighbors call the project a "horror" because of its size in relation to the nearby houses, which are about 34 feet tall. The temple also would not be set back from the property line on 38th Street, as every

house on the block is. While the temple would face Massachusetts Avenue, its 70-foot side wall would be built right to the line, eight to 10 feet from 38th Street. "If you walk your dog, you'll scrape your elbow," Schneiderman said.⁵⁷

These varied, yet comparable, instances of conflict between Asian Americans and members of the dominant community illustrate a prevailing trend across the United States. As the nation increasingly diversifies, non-white members of non-Christian religious faiths are demonized in public discourse through racialized terminology by fearful white Christians. Muslim Americans have been among the most affected by this disturbing trend, augmented in severity by the particularly contentious dealings between foreign national Muslims and the United States in recent years. But, as their population has grown exponentially in recent years, other Asian Americans have increasingly faced the wrath of the white, Judeo-Christian majority. Instances of sacred site construction bring to the surface this often clandestine hostility towards an apparent "model minority."

Sikh Americans are among the religious communities of color who have suffered from this commingling of racial and religious bigotry, sometimes mistaken for Muslims, and other times singled out for abuse because of their conspicuous racial uniforms, accents, or skin color. Religion provides an additional axis of difference for Americans whose racially-informed logic prevents their recognition of Sikhs as fellow Americans.

As the country continues to diversify racially and religiously in the coming years, it remains clear that the issues of racial and religious bigotry towards minority religions—in a nation in which Christianity is the dominant, unofficial state religion—will continue to be a sore spot in non-Christian communities of color across the nation. In order to avoid increasingly rancorous conflict in the coming years, the centuries of Judeo-Christian tradition, morality, and dominance must allow space for the culturally distinct religions that accompany the increasingly racially diverse population of the United States. In addition, members of the dominant community must join with their fellow non-white Americans to battle the vicious combination of white and Christian supremacy which has plagued our nation since its birth.

NOTES

Portions of this article have appeared in Carolyn Chen, *Sociology of Religion* 63(2): 215–238, 2002.

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