

COLUMNISTS

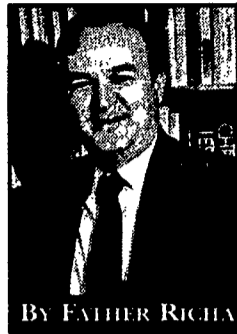
Sikh, Christian conflicts share concerns

Rarely does a week go by without a story in the national press about an intra-religious conflict. It might be a highly charged dispute between Orthodox and secular Jews in Israel over what constitutes a legitimate Sabbath activity, or between traditionalist and mainstream Catholics over gender-inclusive language in liturgical and catechetical texts.

One of the latest samples is provided by an Associated Press story in the *Chicago Tribune*, "Dining dispute at core of Sikh schism: On the eve of a historic anniversary, the faith is in turmoil over how to sit at community meals."

The report opens with the self-evident observation that a religious dispute over how to sit at dinner may seem minor, but for the world's 20 million Sikhs, the issue symbolizes a high-stakes power struggle between moderates and conservatives — those who have risen to leadership positions in North America and those who control the Golden Temple in India, a site as sacred for Sikhs as St. Peter's Basilica is for Catholics.

Sikhism was founded almost five centuries ago in India's Punjab region as a melding of Hindu and Muslim beliefs. Last month the Sikhs celebrated the 300th anniversary of the forming of the Khalsa, a covenant by which male fol-



essays in
theology

BY FATHER RICHARD P. MCBRIEN

lowers adopt the surname Singh and employ various distinguishing symbols of their faith, including a ceremonial dagger, known as the kirpan, and uncut hair. Many of the so-called "Khalsa Sikhs" are recognizable by their carefully wrapped turbans that contain their long hair.

The anniversary festivities were marred this year by the dispute over the proper way to be seated at a community meal. Sikhs have traditionally eaten this meal while sitting on the floor as a sign of equality. In many Sikh temples in North America, however, tables and chairs have been allowed in order to accommodate the elderly and the infirm.

In 1997 there was a near riot in Vancouver, British Columbia, when hard-liners removed furniture from the temple dining hall. When moderates attempted

to replace the tables and chairs, chaos ensued and kirpans were drawn. The scene was repeated in other temples as well.

Sikhism's world leader sided last year with the traditionalists and ordered that all tables and chairs be removed from temple dining halls. He also excommunicated six prominent moderates.

The moderates filed a lawsuit and forced new leadership elections, which the moderates won. But the election results only precipitated more violence.

The AP story quotes an expert on Sikhism at the University of British Columbia who points out that this movement "comes out of a tradition that is anti-hierarchy and anti-caste. It was partially a reaction against the notion of expensive temples and paid priests."

The Sikhs were also at the center of a bitter conflict in India. In 1984 the Indian army stormed, and thereby violated, the Golden Temple to flush out so-called militants. This provocation infuriated the Sikhs. Soon thereafter, Prime Minister Indira Gandhi was assassinated by her Sikh bodyguards. Her murder, in turn, generated fierce anti-Sikh pogroms throughout the country.

Once the period of intense fighting was over, however, the acute internal divisions resurfaced. In its current form,

the battle is between the hard-line Khalsa Sikhs and the rank-and-file, especially those living in the West, who cut their hair and do not wear the turban.

The president of a temple in Vancouver insisted, "I am not so concerned about the hair. My aim is to get the youth to follow the three basic principles: pray to God, make an honest living, and share your earnings with the needy."

His words are reminiscent of those spoken earlier by an itinerant Jewish preacher and healer: "So do not worry and say, 'What are we to eat?' or 'What are we to drink?' or 'What are we to wear?' ... Your heavenly Father knows that you need them all. But seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given you besides" (Matthew 6:31-33).

In most cases, religious hard-liners are only trying to preserve authentic values within their respective traditions. But one cannot successfully preserve real values by confusing accidentals (e.g., seating arrangements) with essentials (e.g., the radical equality of all members).

It is a matter, after all, of seeking first the kingdom of God.

...
Father McBrien is a professor of theology at the University of Notre Dame.

A (golf) swing and a prayer

7th Sunday of Easter (May 16): (R3) John 17:1-11. (R1) Acts 1:12-14. (R2) 1 Peter 4:13-16.

A man bought a computer, but didn't know how to turn the thing on. On a different level, many critical questions confront us as we try to make sense out of our lives. We have gadgets to make our lives so much easier than earlier generations. Space age technology and transportation take us around the world in moments or hours. We have so many advantages that Solomon in all his glory never had. Yet the question we have to ask about our lives is, "Where do you turn the thing on?" Where does the power come from to make our lives effective, fulfilling and worthwhile?

In the early church the power came from prayer. After the ascension of our Lord, the apostles, Mary and the holy women and the brothers of the Lord "devoted themselves to constant prayer." That was the secret of the early church's dynamism: prayer. Wise people still draw their power from prayer.

Eric Liddell, the Olympic champion runner, hero of the movie "Chariots of Fire," knew the power of prayer. In Weissen prison in North China during World War II, a woman in the prison camp



a word
for
sunday

BY FATHER ALBERT SHAMON

there told of Liddell's extraordinary leadership power, his joy and his integrity in the midst of enormous hardship. She revealed the secret of his power.

Every morning about 6 a.m., Liddell used to climb out of his top bunk, pass his sleeping mates, and at a small Chinese table, he and another prisoner would sit with just enough light to illumine their Bibles and notebooks. Silently they read and prayed. And prayer was the secret of Liddell's power.

Prayer, we must realize, is not a substitute for hard work. As Sam Levenson observed long ago, there will always be prayer in schools as long as there are exams. How many of us use prayer as a bail-out device? How many of us use prayer to avoid responsibility?

Charles Sinclair, a lawyer in Coral Gables, Fla., was locked inside the trunk of a car by kidnapers. Sinclair knew that his only chance to escape was to get the trunk opened. So he prayed and pried like mad with a tire iron. When the car slowed for a bump in a hospital complex, Sinclair got out and alerted the guards.

What a beautiful expression for the proper approach to trouble: praying and prying. Our approach is usually complaining and crying. How much better to pray and pry — praying as if everything depended on God, and prying as if everything depended on us. Prayer is not a substitute for hard work.

For effective prayer, we must not only put things in God's hands, but we must trust that God answers prayer.

One day a golfer hit the ball with all his might and it went nowhere. His partner, a rather good golfer, offered him some advice. "You're trying too hard," he said. "Let the club do the work." The duffer took his advice and it changed his game.

Our prayer life and golf game are very much alike. When we feel that we have to be in total control of our lives, we either neglect prayer or turn prayer into a telling God what he should do for us. As

in golf we should let the club do the work, so in prayer we should let God take over. Instead of relying on our own abilities, we should begin to trust God. Many of us fill our lives with unnecessary stress, unnecessary worry, unnecessary aggravation because we will not trust our lives to God. Do the best you can, open your heart up to God in prayer, and then let go!

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Father Shamon is administrator of St. Isaac Jogues Chapel, Fleming.

Daily Readings

Monday, May 17
Acts 19:1-8; John 16:29-33
Tuesday, May 18
Acts 20:17-27; John 17:1-11
Wednesday, May 19
Acts 20:28-38; John 17:11-19
Thursday, May 20
Acts 22:30, 23:6-11; John 17:20-26
Friday, May 21
Acts 25:13-21; John 21:15-19
Saturday, May 22
Acts 28:16-20, 30-31; John 21:20-25

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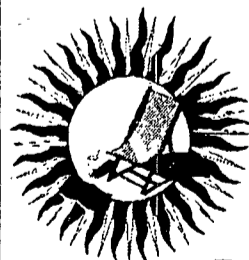
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