

INTRODUCTION

Was Sadhu Sundar Singh a passing fashion or is he a permanent figure in the Christian Church, likely to inspire many generations to come?

A great many of those who know his life and work will be inclined to agree with Queen Wilhelmina (who ruled over Holland for fifty years) in her judgment about Sundar Singh. She wrote:¹ "I never met him, I know him only from his books and the books about him. I belong to those who are deeply impressed by his life and teaching and I am sure the way he manifested his radiant love for Christ and His peace, and in general his teaching, was a real help to me in the worst episodes of the terrible catastrophe that was the last war. Indeed, Sundar Singh was not 'a passing fashion' but a man whose example and teaching should always be remembered."

I met Sadhu Sundar Singh for the first time at Oxford on February 22, 1920, in the Community House of the Cowley Fathers. I was then a post-graduate student in the University, writing a thesis on St. John and the Hindu Bhakti Poets. I had had no occasion to meet Sundar Singh in India, as he belonged to the Punjab and worked on the Himalayas and in North India until 1917 and my home was at Palamcottah in the extreme south of India, not far from Cape Comorin.

The subject of mysticism had greatly attracted me for some years. While I was studying theology in America, a newspaper called *The Christian Patriot* had come to me from Madras, week after week, giving glowing accounts of Sundar Singh's work in India, Ceylon and the Far East. Like other Indian Christians I had been stirred by these reports of an Indian preacher who, both in his life and in his teaching, interpreted Christianity in a way which made a great appeal to India. So, when I came to know that Sundar Singh was at Oxford, I called on him soon after his arrival and asked him whether he would speak in a number of meetings in the University during the week he spent there (February 22-28, 1920).

¹ In her letter to me dated October 24, 1949.

To this he gladly agreed, for preaching was of the very essence of his Christian service and he was always eager to share with others the rich experience he had in his communion with the Living Christ. I listened to all the addresses he gave while at Oxford, had several conversations with him about his inner religious life and made full notes of what he said.

My tutor (the distinguished theologian Canon B. H. Streeter) and I then proposed to him that a permanent record of his teaching might be of value, and he agreed. I spent about a fortnight with him in London and Paris, making further notes, and was present at the interviews he had with various important persons such as the Archbishop of Canterbury and Baron F. H. von Hügel. Canon Streeter also heard several of his addresses and had many long talks with him. Both Canon Streeter and I then spent a year working at our study of the life and teaching of Sundar Singh, which appeared under the title of *The Sadhu*.¹

When Sundar Singh visited Switzerland in 1922 I spent a week with him in Lausanne and Geneva listening to his addresses.

After his second visit to Europe in 1922 Sundar Singh's health broke down. He made Subathu his headquarters and returned there for rest between his tours. Subathu is 4,000 feet high, ten miles from Dharampore, on the mountain railway to Simla. I visited him at Subathu in 1923 and again in 1928 and spent a week with him on each occasion. These were my personal contacts with him besides occasional correspondence.

When *The Sadhu* was written, our main source of information was Sundar Singh himself. We also had before us two books about Sundar Singh by Alfred Zahir entitled *A Lover of the Cross and Soul-Stirring Messages*. For the main facts of his life we depended on Mrs. Parker's little book, *Sadhu Sundar Singh: Called of God*. We also made extensive use of the reports of some of his addresses. We considered carefully a memorandum on him which had been written for us by Baron von Hügel. Our aim was not to write a biography of Sundar Singh but to describe his inner life, to set out the main elements of his teaching and to judge the value of his life as well as of his teaching in the light of modern psychology.

A great deal of new material for understanding Sundar Singh

¹ It had a wide circulation all over the world and passed through many editions. It was also translated into several European and other languages. There seems to be no demand for the book now and the publishers tell me that it is not likely to be reprinted. This book was published in America with a different title—*The Message of Sadhu Sundar Singh*.

(enigmatic and baffling in some respects) is now available. I should like to indicate these fresh sources of information.

Before Sundar Singh came into prominence, he wrote in Urdu during the years 1912 to 1917 a series of letters in a Christian paper called *Nur Afshan*, giving reports of his work. An English translation of the *Nur Afshan* letters is now in deposit in the Central Library in Zürich. Through the kindness of the Director of the Library I have been able to use these important papers.

A brief chronicle of his early journeys, which Sundar Singh wrote in Urdu and which was printed only once, has now come to light. An English translation of this travel diary was made by Mrs. Parker.

Dozens of letters which Sundar Singh wrote to his friends have been sent to me. Sundar Singh did not, as a rule, write long letters describing the events of his life, outer or inner. But he was a prompt correspondent and tried to answer all the many letters which reached him. Some of these letters, though quite brief, give interesting glimpses of his inner life as well as of his public activities. A series of thirteen letters which he wrote towards the end of his life to a friend in America (Pastor Goddard) on the problems of the future life, after he had studied the writings of Swedenborg, is of particular interest.

Between 1921 and 1928 he wrote six small devotional books: *At the Master's Feet*, *Reality and Religion*, *The Search after Reality*, *Meditations on Various Aspects of the Spiritual Life*, *Visions of the Spiritual World*, and *With and Without Christ*. These books gave intimate glimpses of his spiritual development and contained many of his beautiful parables. Slight though they were, they had an extensive circulation and were translated into as many as forty languages, even before his death.

In his home at Subathu several files of newspaper cuttings giving accounts of his meetings, particularly during his first tour to Europe, were found. There were also numerous letters which people wrote to him from different parts of the world asking him for spiritual guidance. These are called the Subathu papers in this book. They have been lent to me by the Trustees of the Sadhu Sundar Singh Trust Fund, to whom my thanks are due.

Many friends of Sundar Singh are still alive. They have sent me their reminiscences and newspaper cuttings about his work. Some of the reminiscences are of outstanding importance. Mr. Vincent S. David, a leading layman in the Diocese of Bombay, is one of those

who have been profoundly influenced by Sundar Singh. Mr. Vincent David travelled with him as his interpreter on different occasions and also visited him at Subathu. He said that he had so many reminiscences to give me that he himself could not put them down in writing but that I should go to Bombay and write down what he had to say. This I was able to do. Mr. Vincent David has an unusually clear and vivid memory, and he dictated to me many interesting recollections. We need to remember, however, that these recollections are thirty-three years old and that it is possible that his memory has modified some of the facts.

The most careful arrangements were made for Sundar Singh's tour in Switzerland in 1922. In no other country which he visited had the arrangements been more thorough. Wherever he went he addressed large meetings and for almost every meal there were groups of people to meet him, once as many as twenty-eight. A shorthand typist, Miss Goodwin, was engaged to travel with his party and to take down in shorthand all his addresses as well as the answers which he gave to the questions in small parties. She did her work very conscientiously. She kept a full, frank and intimate diary in which she put down every little incident and saying which was likely to throw light on his character. When in one place he was asked to offer an extempore prayer Miss Goodwin quickly opened her notebook and took down the prayer in shorthand. It was a beautiful prayer and we are glad to have it. But it would have been very difficult for Sundar Singh to live, hour after hour, under the pressure of such publicity.

The shorthand reports of his addresses were afterwards translated into French and published under the title *Par Christ et Pour Christ*. Pastor G. Secretan added to this book a Foreword giving a brief but vivid account of the Sadhu's tour in Switzerland. The Goodwin diary, shorthand reports in English of all the addresses he gave while in Switzerland, the questions which were asked him, the answers which he gave and the French book *Par Christ et Pour Christ* are all available now, providing ample material for an account of Sundar Singh's work in Switzerland.

In 1940 Mlle. Alice van Berchem wrote in French a biography of Sundar Singh with the title *Un Temoin du Christ*. Besides giving a careful summary of his life and teaching, it contains some new material about his work in Switzerland.

Archbishop Soderblom, a great scholar on the history of religions and Archbishop of Uppsala at that time, wrote about

Sundar Singh in two Swedish books, *Tre Livsformer* and *Sundar Singhs Budskap*. These books contain an independent estimate of Sundar Singh and give some reminiscences of his work in Sweden. I am grateful to the Rev. B. Fr. Tiliander for reading through them carefully and translating into English the passages included in this book.

Sadhu Sundar Singh: A Personal Memoir, by C. F. Andrews, is a book of great value for an understanding of Sundar Singh. C. F. Andrews knew Sundar Singh intimately when he was young. Being himself of a mystical bent of mind, C. F. Andrews is able to bring out with great clearness the inner life of the Sadhu. With his marked literary gifts, long experience in writing and deep Christian life, C. F. Andrews has produced a striking portrait of Sundar Singh.

The Rev. T. E. Riddle, who knew Sundar Singh from 1912 to 1929 and helped him to translate from Urdu into English four of his devotional books, wrote in *The United Church Review* in 1946 a series of eleven articles which are of much value as another estimate of Sundar Singh by one who had moved with him closely over a long period of years. Mr. Riddle has now had these articles published in New Zealand as a book, with the title *Vision and Call*, by the Overseas Missions Committee, Presbyterian Church of New Zealand.

After Sundar Singh's return from his second tour in Europe in 1922 a violent controversy broke out about his honesty. The Roman Catholics could not understand how a man of his spiritual stature could appear outside their own Church. The Modernists were baffled by the many miracles which he narrated as having occurred in his life. Both the Roman Catholics and the Modernists joined hands and every event of his life was examined with the minutest care. Sundar Singh was not a historian. He kept no diary. He described again and again from memory many incidents in his life as illustrations of the saving power of God. These many versions were studied most critically.

Father Hosten, S.J., wrote a series of violent articles in *The Catholic Herald of India* denouncing Sundar Singh as an impostor.

Dr. Pfister, a Protestant pastor in Switzerland, wrote in German a book entitled *Die Legende Sundar Singhs* in which he made out that the miraculous experiences to which he laid claim were nothing more than his own subjective fancies.

Professor F. Heiler wrote three books in German about Sundar

Singh. His book, *Sadhu Sundar Singh: Ein Apostel des Ostens und Westens*, is now available in English under the title *The Gospel of Sadhu Sundar Singh*. This book, written before the controversy, is a careful study of the life and teaching of Sundar Singh with numerous interesting comparisons and contrasts between Sundar Singh and the great saints of the Christian Church such as St. Francis, St. Augustine, Thomas à Kempis, Luther and others. When Sundar Singh's honesty was called in question, Professor Heiler wrote another book about him entitled *Apostel oder Betruger?* He also sent out a circular to all those who had had any personal contact with him and asked them for every fragment of information they had about him. The material which he collected and the conclusions to which he came are now available in the German book entitled *Die Wahrheit Sundar Singhs*. These three books have provided much material for my biography.

The Rev. P. Gabler, who worked as a Lutheran missionary in South India, wrote in 1937 a dissertation, *Sadhu Sundar Singh*, in German for the Theological Faculty of Leipzig. He examined with minute care all the books and papers by his enemies as well as his friends. The conclusion to which he came was that Sundar Singh told many lies, though we had also clear evidence that the grace of God rested on him and that his ministry was really fruitful. I am unable to accept this conclusion, for reasons which I have set out in the chapter entitled "Life at Subathu". Pastor Gabler's treatise contains a text of 172 pages in small type, a bibliography in sixteen pages of the books and pamphlets written by or about Sundar Singh, and notes of nearly one hundred pages. All this material has been collected with much painstaking thoroughness. Pastor Gabler continually seeks to be fair and impartial in his judgments. But without a personal knowledge of Sundar Singh he errs fatally in many of his conclusions. His book, however, is a mine of information for the Sadhu's biographers.

The time has come to gather together the stories of the men and women whose lives were changed by their contact with Sundar Singh. There were thousands of people who were greatly impressed by what he said and did and whose own Christian faith was deepened by hearing his addresses or reading his books. My enquiries for the past seven years have made it clear that there were also men and women whose entire lives were transformed by God through Sundar Singh's instrumentality. It is difficult to make an accurate and comprehensive list of such people, partly because his work was

spread over many countries and partly because many people are reticent about the deepest experiences of their spiritual life and are unwilling to write down for publication what he has meant to them. Some moving stories of how the lives of men and women have been permanently influenced through his ministry have, however, been sent to me. These stories are included in this Life of Sundar Singh.

As Christianity takes root in different countries with their ancient philosophic and spiritual cultures, certain elements of its teaching receive new emphasis. The religion of Jesus Christ is for the whole world. It is so infinitely rich that different nations with their characteristic gifts interpret and emphasize this or that aspect of its teaching. We, to-day, speak constantly of a World Church. We look for interpretations of Christianity made by the different nations of the world. We feel sure that the tributes which are laid at the feet of Jesus Christ by different countries are of great value to the whole Church. A study of the life and teaching of Sundar Singh makes it certain that some of the noblest longings of the Indian soul which he inherited were offered up to Christ and received a fresh beauty under His touch. The immense crowds which gathered to hear Sundar Singh when he visited the different countries of the world and the wide circulation of his books convince us that he has, under the providence of God, a distinctive message for the World Church. A devoted follower of Christ and a genuine Indian, his life as well as his teaching are of great significance.

Numerous people have helped me to write this book. I would like to thank them all for their prompt and generous response to my request for reminiscences, letters, reports of addresses, etc. In particular I am indebted to Professor Heiler for sending me much valuable material. Mrs. Soderblom has sent me a copy of all the relevant letters in Archbishop Soderblom's files. The Rev. H. A. Popley and Dr. M. P. Davis have sent me their files for study. The Rev. M. C. Langton has translated into English the relevant passages from the French book *Par Christ et Pour Christ*. Dr. P. E. Burckhardt, Miss Biberstein, and the Rev. Hans Zimmermann have translated from German into English the passages needed for this book. M. Senaud and Pastor Rougemont have sent to me all the papers connected with Sundar Singh's visit to Switzerland. Sri S. J. Duraiswamy, General Secretary of the National Missionary Society in Madras, has sent to me a copy of all the articles in *The National Missionary Intelligencer* about Sundar Singh. Father

Lazarus of the Russian Orthodox Church has read through the manuscript and suggested various improvements. To all these friends I should like to express here my warm thanks.

Readers of this book who may have reports of Sundar Singh's sermons or articles written by him are requested to send them to me so that another book dealing with his teaching may be written.

A. J. APPASAMY

*Coimbatore,
July 31, 1956.*

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