

Title of Book: **Guru Nanak's Religious Pluralism And Sri Guru Granth Sahib**

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Foreword by: **Tarlochan Singh (Ex-MP)**

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Dr Jaspal Singh (Ex-VC Punjabi University, Patiala) justifies the title of this book by his remarks: "The distinctiveness of Sri Guru Granth Sahib lies in its strong emphasis on religious pluralism. It is quite explicit in accepting and respecting the identities of different religious traditions. Not only this, the *bani* (the verses) of the sacred Sikh scripture appreciates and glorifies pluralism, and it views the diversity of the world as its beauty and strength. Furthermore, the *bani* clearly manifests that religious pluralism is not a matter of knowing other religious traditions, but respectfully interacting and having open dialogues with them. *Undoubtedly, Guru Nanak's philosophy of interfaith understanding through dialogue is the only way to attain peace, progress, and unity in the world*".

The book under review consists of 13 chapters. It has been written as a tribute to the founder of Sikh religion on his 550th birth anniversary. Harpreet Singh, President of Guru Nanak Foundation, in his message proclaims: "These are proud and blissful moments for us that we are celebrating the 550th Birth Anniversary of Sri Guru Nanak Dev Ji. Gurmat enlightens us and tells us that the commemoration of our Divine Mentors makes us wiser and more optimistic".

Tarlochan Singh (Ex-MP) and a promoter of Sikh ethos during this anniversary writes in his Foreword: "The book covers the subject close to my heart: it elucidates how the wisdom-seeking Sikhs derive their guidance and inspiration from their Guru that lives in the hymns of Sri Guru Granth Sahib. It discusses the selected themes of the sacred Sikh scripture with clarity and eloquence".

Dr. Harbans Lal, the senior author of this volume, is a highly acclaimed scholar of pharmacology and neuroscience of University of North Texas Health Science Centre at Fort Worth, Texas. He is a popular blog writer "Seeking Wisdom" to share his knowledge and wisdom with the world on Sikhi, Gurmat, the Guru Granth Sahib and the Sikh history. I believe some of the ideas contributed in this volume were published as part of his blogs. Dr. Roshan Attrey is an accomplished scholar of English who joined hands with Harbans Lal to create this masterpiece of Sikh literature.

I cannot resist quoting from the Foreword of Tarlochan Singh, which in a way is an Abstract of this volume. I agree with his remarks: "Those unacquainted with Sikhi or the Sikh scripture would find it fascinating to learn how the Guru concept evolved in Sikhism in contrast to Hinduism and other Indian religions. The book reviews the reasons why the Tenth Sikh Guru installed this scripture as the eternal Guru".

According to the authors, many other writers tend to mix history and tradition in their reading of the Sikh scripture. They state in the Preface: "The Guru Granth Sahib should primarily define, guide, and validate the religious and spiritual teachings for the Sikhs rather than history and tradition". I find it as a unique feature and this thought is underscored throughout this volume. Some of the highlights of this volume are enumerated by the authors as follows:

1. The Guru Granth Sahib should constitute Sikhi rather than Sikh history and tradition.

2. How to separate the content of the book (the scripture) from its form – the context from the text, one part from the other, the metaphor from its figurative meaning, or the allusion from its referent? Meanings are embedded and interwoven in the text and context, causing various interpretations and disagreements among followers and readers.

3. Each reader or believer responds differently to a *sabd* (hymn or verse), commonly spelled and pronounced as *shabad*, from the Guru Granth Sahib and finds a different meaning in it.

4. The Sikh sacred scripture offers the message of a monotheistic religion expressing the yearning of the believer to be united with the universal father or mother called *Ik (Ek) Onkaar*, Waheguru, or God, in a manner its authors – the Gurus and Bhagats – felt inspired to describe Him/Her/It. It is imbued with a modern spirit, which finds its best expression in such values as democracy, pluralism, freedom, and individuality.

5. The Sikh scripture is not a manifesto for political or economic liberation. Such discussion is used only to explain an aspect of theology that may best be explained by illustrations from contemporary history.

6. The scripture deals primarily with truths transcending the scientific or secular. It speaks of natural and supernatural truths, God and His creation, humanity and community, and social-cultural life.

*It is unnecessary to claim scientific or secular truths in the scripture, and any attempts to prove it so would be a needless distraction to the believers because doing it so would be an attempt to prove that our religion is principally about provable things.*

7. The Granth encompasses the provable and improvable, the rational and irrational, the mundane and supernatural. It is a book of religious faith that fulfills the human need for religious experience and liberation, providing moral, religious, and communal guidance as needed. It needs not be defined by science and technology, and its truths are not to be judged by any contradictions that rational mind may not comprehend.

In the first three Chapters, authors discuss the evolution of Sikh religion, composition and compilation of Guru Granth Sahib, and evolution of the concept of Shabad Guru in Sikh religion. The universal character of Sikh scripture is emphasized: "Sri Guru Granth Sahib is a sacred scripture of the world and the eternal Guru of the Sikhs. An integral part of the world's spiritual heritage, the Granth may also serve as a scripture for a universal religion in the new global village". They also confirm its authenticity: "Among the world's great scriptures, the Guru Granth is the only scripture that was composed, edited, proofread, and signed for authenticity by the founders of the faith in their lifetime. Perhaps no other scripture can make this claim".

Chapter 4 "Revealed Theology" claims that Sikh scripture is a revealed theology which is not based on history: "The internal evidence of divine revelation found in the Guru Granth verses, compiled by the founders, is the basis of Sikh Theology. This evidence should stop much awkward acrobatics that scholars, historians, scientists and theologians may sometimes indulge in". The authors cite evidence in support of their thesis: "Its founder, Guru Nanak, disclosed this aspect in his mission statement to Bhai Lalo at his very first stop on his first missionary journey.

*As the Word of and about the Creator descends to me, so do I articulate to people, O Lalo.*  
(SGGS, M.1, P.722)

Guru Nanak affirmed that his assignment to spread the divine message came directly from the Creator:

*I, a minstrel, was out of work, when the Master took me into His service.*

*To sing His Praises day and night, He gave me His Order, right from the start.*

(SGGS, M.1, P.150)

Chapter 5 "Sikh Theology Versus History" is a unique contribution of the authors in this volume. They are warning about the dangers of history infiltrating into Sikh Theology: *"If we should believe that Sikh theology was born from historical events, or originated from concepts derived from history, rather than from divine inspiration, we would obtain radically different scenarios or implications. The first implication is that the Gurus neither proclaimed Sikh theology nor caused it to be proclaimed. The second is that Sikh theology has continued to change and evolve with history. And the third is that the Guru Granth containing Sikh theology is not eternal and that Guru Gobind Singh's command to Sikhs to accept the Scripture as eternal is apocryphal. Should any of these scenarios take hold, it would be a serious blow to the Sikh doctrines and theology impacting on civil society"*.

They highlight the unique character of Sikhi vis a vis other religions: *"The concept of revealed theology sets the Sikh religion apart from many other world religions. In the case of other world religions, such as Christianity, only historical routes to theology had to be accepted because the founding prophets had left no written word behind"*. They also warn us of Mcleodian school of scholars who are bent upon distorting Sikh theology based on history rather than revelation.

Chapter 6 is focused on 'Guru Nanak's Vision of Spiritual Pluralism'. In Guru Granth, the spirituality is unshackled from divisive ethnicity. The interfaith character of the Granth is further strengthened by the multilingual media employed by its authors to capture their divine visions. The Guru Granth underscores that all those living on this planet are inter-related and interdependent. They are related to each other by a common element of the Divinity they have inherited. They are illuminated by the same divine light running through everyone as a single thread. Guru Nanak expresses this thought as follows:

*Every heart contains the same divine light. It is the light of the Divine that brightens all hearts.*

(SGGS, M.1, P. 663)

Chapter 7 highlights "The Sikh Way of Worship". I feel this most difficult task has been accomplished by the authors with diligence: *"In Sikhism, the Sabd or Word Guru became personified in the verses, songs, teachings, and inspirations. This novel paradigm of worship needed entirely new types of rituals, religious practices and, above all, channels of communication in the service of the Word form of the Guru. The founders of Sikhism helped this process by laying the foundation of several institutions of exegesis and exposition as part of their religious practices. These practices inculcate intellectual deliberation, wisdom, and meditation while preserving faith in the institution of the Word Guru"*.

Authors have tried to differentiate the *pooja* of Hindus from the worship of Guru Granth: *"The Guru-Shabad manifested in the sacred book is revered by the Sikhs as their eternal Guru and was given the title Sri Guru Granth Sahib, which designates the position traditionally given to the deity in other religions. So the Sikhs worship their shabad guru residing in the Guru Granth as their eternal Guru. According to the Sikh theology, the SABD parmaan or Gurbani is the object of meditation and not any physical form of the Guru. This belief is emphasized, underscored, and repeated many times over in the Guru Granth"*.

The dichotomy between Shabad Guru and Granth Guru is resolved in Chapter 8. The object of worship or meditation for the Sikhs is not the deity Guru in physical form, but the Word or shabad enshrined in Sri Guru Granth Sahib. The authors reiterate that *paath deedar* is clearly a new way to approach God and central to Sikh worship. The *paath deedar* is the Sikh's

vehicle for contemplation on the Guru Granth verses and the qualitative knowledge of the Divine. One of the basic tenets of Sikhism, the *path deedar* is an essential part of the practice of Sikh worship. It is in effect the Guru-Shabad worship, aiming to invoke the Spirit of the Deity –aiming in effect to materialize the Guru-Shabad. The concept of *paath-deedar*, its practice, and efficacy is explained exhaustively by the authors: "*When practiced faithfully and regularly, paath deedar opens up our consciousness to let the divine power working in us and to let the True Guru dwell in our heart*".

The following three Chapters (9-11) describe the techniques of doing *paath*, *kirtan* and meditation. The authors claim *kirtan* as a medium to realize God: "Thus, *kirtan* becomes an indispensable medium of understanding and experiencing the sacred teachings of the Gurus. It becomes a path for the seeker leading to the ultimate destination – *Ik Onkaar*, *Waheguru*, the Infinite Wisdom, or God".

Chapter 12 "Theology of *Mool Mantar*: The Commencing Verse" is the last and one of the most significant Chapters of this volume. *Mool Mantar* is the *summum bonum* of Sikh scripture. According to authors: "Guru Nanak, the founder of Sikhi discovered the ultimate way to deal with human unhappiness, to alleviate human suffering. *He had the revelation and composed mool mantar as the Sikh Article of Faith*. Its sacred words are designed for meditation, which, when performed regularly as a habit, offers humanity an immense opportunity not merely to pray to God, obey or fear God, but even to become godlike". The authors plead for using *mool mantar* as a medium for meditation which is a new idea in Sikh theology: "The practice of *mool mantar* may gradually endow the devotee with divine attributes, thereby making him or her capable of doing as God does".

The authors deserve all praise for their labour of love to prepare this commemorative volume "Guru Nanak's Religious Pluralism And Sri Guru Granth Sahib". They have succeeded in re-interpreting Sikh Theology and its revealed character. Of late, there have been veiled attacks on the authenticity of Guru Nanak's revelations by scholars, both Indian and foreign. Using the tools of Gurbani quotes from Sri Guru Granth Sahib, the authors of this volume demolish the nefarious designs of such scholars. I hope this new volume will prove to be a lighthouse for the Sikh youth to strengthen their faith in the legacy of Guru Nanak and the Sikh scripture.