

# **Sikh Religion and Christianity: An Interfaith Dialogue**

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## **ABSTRACT**

To achieve the objective of inter-faith dialogue in the present day world, it is imperative to study the holy books or scriptures of different religious traditions. Unless we find some common basic principles propounded in the holy books there can be no meeting point for an interfaith dialogue which can ultimately lead to world peace. During the twenty first century, unification ideas in science, globalization in world economy, holistic vision of reality and science – religion dialogue is expected to bring about a paradigm shift in the human behaviour.

This essay is dedicated to Dr. Job Kozamthadam, a crusader for science – religion and inter-faith dialogues in India, in celebration of his 60<sup>th</sup> birthday. An attempt has been made to compare and contrast some of the doctrinal principles of Sikh religion and Christianity based on their holy books, viz., Sri Guru Granth Sahib (SGGS) and the Bible (Old and New Testament).

## **Introduction**

Sikhism and Christianity belong to two different religious traditions, commonly known as Oriental and Occidental or Semitic, respectively. Both are also separated historically by a gap of fifteen centuries. Guru Nanak was founder of Sikh religion in India while Jesus Christ founded the Christianity in Palestine. Both the prophets have been considered as crusaders against the established religious traditions of their country of origin. While Guru Nanak started his campaign against the established social, religious and political system in India, Jesus did the same in Palestine. Guru Nanak was fighting against the Brahmanical traditions of Hindu society in India during the 15<sup>th</sup> century. Jesus Christ had to fight against the Jewish traditions of Palestine and Christians earned the wrath of Roman empire for more than three hundred years. Sikh Gurus and their followers had to suffer at the hands of Mughal emperors for almost three hundred years.

Both Sikhism and Christianity have another common feature: they are religions of the book. The religious book of the Christians is called “The Bible”. It consists of two parts: (a) The Old Testament – a covenant between man and the God of the Jews (Jehovah), and (b) the New Testament – a collection of biographical sketches of Jesus and an interpretation of his philosophy as understood by his disciples. The sixty six books of the

present Bible were written by no less than forty writers over a period of two centuries. Jesus himself did not leave even a single line in writing nor did he instruct anyone to do so. The holy book of Sikh religion (SGGS) was compiled by Guru Arjun, the fifth Nanak, in 1604. It has compositions of Sikh Gurus and the sacred writings of various Hindu and Muslim saints of India. The authentic version of SGGS compiled by Guru Arjun was enshrined and declared as 'Sabd Guru' of the Sikhs in 1708 by Guru Gobind Singh, the tenth Nanak. SGGS does not contain history or biographies of the Sikh Gurus except for some indirect references here and there. It is written in verse and is meant for singing following the rich tradition of Indian *ragas*.

The Sikh tradition of Inter-faith dialogue originated with Guru Nanak, the first prophet of Sikh religion, who made it a mission of his life to visit holy places of other religious sects in India and abroad. Guru Nanak traveled far and wide in all four directions and held discourses with Hindu saints, Muslim *peers* and *Nath-yogis*. The essence of these discourses is recorded in SGGS and the famous composition known as Sidh-Gosht refers to one such remarkable debate with Nath-Yogis. However, there is no evidence of any discourse with followers of Christianity in SGGS.

### **Inter- Comparison of Sikh Scripture and the Holy Bible**

It is quite but natural that the two belief systems, Sikhism and Christianity, which were separated in both time and space, may have some common doctrines as well as widely different approaches to epistemological concepts, viz., origin of the universe, nature of reality, the relation between soul of man and his body and concept of liberation. For sake of comparison, we discuss some basic concepts in both Sikhism and Christianity to appreciate the viewpoints about such fundamental questions : What is God? How the Universe was created? What are the Ideal Man and his role in Society? What are Heaven, Hell and Grace of God?

### **Concept of God**

The Sikh concept of ultimate Reality or God is more akin to the Judaic notion of an Almighty person than to the Aryan concept of an immanent neutral principle<sup>1</sup>. In the opening stanza of SGGS, Ultimate Reality is defined as: One (Being – Becoming), Truth and Existence, Creator Person, without Fear or Hatred, Beyond Time and Space, Self-Existent, Transcendental Cosmic Spirit made manifest by the Grace of the Guru.

The basic Sikh thought is strictly monistic<sup>2</sup> and there is no room for demi-gods and goddesses as in Hinduism :

“From One the many emanate and finally,

O, Nanak into the One the many submerge”.

ਸਤਿਨਾਮੁ ਕਰਤਾ ਹਕਿਮੁ ਨ ਭਉ ਭਾਇ ॥

The main doctrines of Sikh theology are based on this view of Ultimate Reality. Reality or God was in existence before the creation of Universe. The Sikh philosophy dialectically unites the ideas of God and the world. Transcendence shows that God is prior to and distinct from the world. Immanence of God represents God's connection with the world. In a manner of speaking, God is one but has dual nature, Transcendental and Immanent. Guru Nanak has identified the manifest reality with Nature<sup>3</sup>:

“Nanak, the beneficent Lord alone is True,  
and He is revealed through his Nature”.

ਨਾਨਕ ਜੀ ਸਾਹਿਬ ਜੀ ॥

Concept of God is central to Christianity but Christians sometimes call Jesus God but at other times call him Son of God. “God so loved the world that he sacrificed his only begotten son for it”. The Bible uses similar epithet for others also, e.g., David and Adam. The Bible even calls common people ‘sons and daughters’ of God<sup>4</sup>. We find an echo of this concept in SGGS. According to Sikh belief all human beings are sons and daughters of God<sup>5</sup>:

“O God, you are my Father and you are my Mother”.

ਸਤਿਨਾਮੁ ਕਰਤਾ ਹਕਿਮੁ ਨ ਭਉ ਭਾਇ ॥

Bhagat Kabir also calls himself son of God in SGGS <sup>6</sup>:

“I am your son and you are my Father, We both live together”

ਸਤਿਨਾਮੁ ਕਰਤਾ ਹਕਿਮੁ ਨ ਭਉ ਭਾਇ ॥

A similar sentiment is expressed by Jesus to establish his relationship with God<sup>7</sup>: “I came down from heaven. I and my Father are one. I will come again to receive you unto myself”.

Christians believe that Christ will be their saviour on Doomsday. Sikhs do not believe in any such dogma. In contrast, Sikhism believes in the salvation of all through God's grace irrespective of their religious affiliations<sup>8</sup>:

“O God this world is burning in its own sins,

Save it in Thy Mercy. It matters not  
Which way (religious path) they approach You”.

ਸ੍ਰੀ ਗੁਰੂ ਗ੍ਰੰਥ ਸਾਹਿਬ ਜੀ  
ਮੁਕਤੀ ਮੰਤਰ

### Creation of the Universe (Genesis):

The holy Bible states<sup>9</sup> “In the beginning God created heaven and earth.... Let there be light ..... Let there be a firmament... Let the waters bring forth life. And the evening and morning were created the sixth day. He rested on the seventh day and blessed and sanctified it ”.

The Genesis story of the Bible has been challenged by physicists, biologists and geologists on the basis of scientific findings which contradict this hypothesis. For example, according to this scheme, the earth existed before the sun and the stars. The days existed before the sun came into existence. In fact, the whole scheme looks topsy – turvy in modern scientific terms.

According to Sikh Cosmology, God existed before creation in *sunya* (void) phase. Then He willed the creation of the universe and the process began as follows<sup>10</sup>:

“The Lord created air (gases) which combined to form water.  
The water brought forth the creation with the  
Lord Himself as the spark of life in it.”

ਸ੍ਰੀ ਗੁਰੂ ਗ੍ਰੰਥ ਸਾਹਿਬ ਜੀ  
ਮੁਕਤੀ ਮੰਤਰ

The Sikh scripture (SGGS) unfolds the Genesis story in a most scientific manner. As for the time of creation, it is known to God alone. There are countless suns, moons, and earths in the Universe. Man can never know the extent of God's creation<sup>11</sup>:

“There are millions and millions of galaxies and  
solar systems in the Universe. The creation has  
occurred so many times. But the one Lord  
remains for ever and ever.”

ਸ੍ਰੀ ਗੁਰੂ ਗ੍ਰੰਥ ਸਾਹਿਬ ਜੀ  
ਮੁਕਤੀ ਮੰਤਰ

One of the most beautiful hymns in SGGS is the ‘Hymn of the Genesis’ which runs as follows<sup>12</sup>:

“For billions of years, there was nothing but utter darkness.  
There was neither day nor night, nor moon, nor sun but the  
Lord alone sat in profound trance.....  
When He so willed, He created the world and supported the  
firmament without support. He founded the continents, solar  
systems and underworlds, and from the Absolute self, He  
became manifest.”

□□□  
□□□

### Concept of Salvation, Heaven and Hell

According to Christian belief, salvation is possible only through Christ<sup>13</sup>. His spirit will escort all Christians to God’s presence. “There is only one intermediary among God’s men who has paid the price for everybody’s salvation”. “There is no salvation through anyone else, in all the world no other name has been granted to mankind by which we can be saved”.

Sikhism does not claim monopoly of salvation nor does it believe in salvation that supposedly comes after death. SGGS advocates salvation during this life itself. By following the Sikh way of life, one can attain to the state of *jivan-mukta* (liberated while living).

Christianity does not look for the immortality of a soul but the resurrection of the complete person in a new and wonderful body. Those who are saved by Christ will go to heaven and those not saved will suffer punishment in hell. Christians are already saved because they already have forgiveness and new life promised by Jesus Christ<sup>14</sup>.

Sikhism believes that man’s soul is immortal because it is part and parcel of God but is separated from Him due to ego. Guru-oriented Sikhs (*gurmukhs*) are liberated during this life before physical death while *manmukhs* (ego-oriented) suffer during this life and life hereafter. Heaven and Hell have different connotations in Sikh vocabulary. The idea of a Heaven in the skies and Hell in the bowels of earth is not recognized in Sikhism. This world can become a heaven for a *gurmukh* and a hell for *manmukh*. Heaven and hell refer to the state of mind of an individual and not some physical spaces.

### Ethics and Morality

The Sikhs pay great respect to their holy book (SGGS), wash their bodies, cover their heads and take off their shoes when they pray to God. It is interesting to note that in the past the Christians<sup>15</sup> also conducted their religious services like the Sikhs do today.

Jesus says<sup>16</sup>, “Thy will be done.” In SGGS<sup>17</sup>, it is called *hukam* or divine Will which cannot, however, be explained: “By His Will, creation takes place but His Will is indescribable”

ਸਤਿਨਾਮੁ ਕਰਤਾ ਹੁਕਮੁ ਕਰਤਾ ॥ ਨਾਨਕ ॥

Jesus says that there are two commands<sup>18</sup>: “Love God with all heart, mind and body, and love neighbour as self”. Guru Gobind Singh puts it as a pre-condition for God-realisation<sup>19</sup>:

“I proclaim the Truth, listen ye all.  
Only those who Love have realised God”.

ਸਤਿਨਾਮੁ ਕਰਤਾ ਹੁਕਮੁ ਕਰਤਾ ॥ ਨਾਨਕ ॥

Sikh Gurus realised the power of Love and the price has to be paid by total submission to God or Guru, the preceptor. In SGGS, Guru Nanak lays down the stringent condition for the dedicated disciple<sup>20</sup>:

“If you want to play the game of Love,  
Come into my street with your head on thy palm”.

ਸਤਿਨਾਮੁ ਕਰਤਾ ਹੁਕਮੁ ਕਰਤਾ ॥ ਨਾਨਕ ॥

The Bible lays stress on purity of heart<sup>21</sup>: “Cleanliness of body is of no avail but purity of heart”. In SGGS, the same sentiment is expressed as follows<sup>22</sup>:

“What is the use of bathing at places of pilgrimage?  
When your mind is full of filth due to stubborn pride”.

ਸਤਿਨਾਮੁ ਕਰਤਾ ਹੁਕਮੁ ਕਰਤਾ ॥ ਨਾਨਕ ॥

Idolatry was condemned by Jesus in strongest terms and the Bible supports this viewpoint<sup>23</sup>: “Man is a living temple of God, why then need to go for idols.”

All the Sikh Gurus condemned idolatry in their sermons, a clear divergence from the Hindu religion. Sikh Gurus advocated the efficacy of meditation, congregational prayers, chorus singing of hymns for God realization and rejected the rituals and idol worship. In fact, Guru Nanak very clearly stated in SGGS<sup>24</sup> that the physical body is not the Guru.

“The Word (*sabad*) is my Guru and consciousness is the disciple”.

ਸਤਿਨਾਮੁ ਕਰਤਾ ਹੁਕਮੁ ਕਰਤਾ ॥ ਨਾਨਕ ॥

It is interesting to remark that manifestation of spiritual acts is commended in the Bible while works of flesh, viz., adultery, lasciviousness, hatred, drunkenness and vain glory are condemned in no uncertain terms. SGGS speaks in identical tones and forbids coming under the influence of five evils, namely, lust, anger, greed, attachment, and pride (*kam, karodh, lobh, moh* and *ahankar*).

I was amused to read message of Bible regarding meat eating and drinking of wine<sup>25</sup>: “It is good neither to eat flesh, nor to drink wine, nor anything whereby thy brother stumbleth, or is offended, or is made weak”. “The kingdom of God is not meat and drink but righteousness, peace and joy. All things are pure but it is evil for that man who eats with offence”. Intoxicants are forbidden in Sikh religion but meat eating is part of Sikh code of conduct. Ideas about meat eating and drinking are almost identical in Bible and SGGS.

Jesus said<sup>26</sup>: “Render unto Caesar the things which be Caesar’s and unto God the things which be God’s”. Thus, the spiritual and the political life were separated into two different domains. The Sikh Gurus, on the other hand, recognized God as the True ruler. In Sikhism, both spiritual and political activity is sanctioned and the concept of *miri* and *piri* forms the basis of Sikh ethics. However, Guru Gobind Singh<sup>27</sup> has also recognized the two domains as distinct as in Bible. He states: “Both Guru Nanak and Emperor Babur were created by the same God. The House of Nanak is recognized as spiritual and the House of Babur as political for all intents and purposes”.

ਭਗਤਾਂ ਦੀ ਸੇਵਾ ਵਿਚ ਸ਼ਾਮਲ ਹੋਣਾ ਸਿੱਖਾਂ ਲਈ ਇੱਕ ਬਹੁਮਹੱਤਵਪੂਰਨ ਗੁਣ ਹੈ।  
ਇਹ ਗੁਣ ਸਿੱਖਾਂ ਨੂੰ ਸਿਰਫ਼ ਆਪਣੇ ਆਪ ਨੂੰ ਸੇਵਾ ਦੇਣ ਨਹੀਂ, ਸਗੋਂ ਹੋਰਾਂ ਦੀ ਸੇਵਾ ਵਿਚ ਸ਼ਾਮਲ ਹੋਣ ਦੀ ਸਹਿਮਤੀ ਦਿਖਾਉਂਦਾ ਹੈ।

The concepts of Word in the Bible and *Sabad* in the SGGS are almost compatible and have a far reaching import in the Creation process. According to Bible<sup>28</sup>: “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. Through him all things were made.” The explicit functions of the Word are Creation, Revelation and Salvation<sup>29</sup>. SGGS also implies that *Sabad* (Word) is the vehicle for all creative activity of God<sup>30</sup>, promotes understanding of God and union with God is possible by meditation on *Sabad*:

ਸ਼ਬਦ ਸਿਰਫ਼ ਸਿਰਫ਼ ਆਪਣੇ ਆਪ ਨੂੰ ਸੇਵਾ ਦੇਣ ਨਹੀਂ, ਸਗੋਂ ਹੋਰਾਂ ਦੀ ਸੇਵਾ ਵਿਚ ਸ਼ਾਮਲ ਹੋਣ ਦੀ ਸਹਿਮਤੀ ਦਿਖਾਉਂਦਾ ਹੈ।

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