

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

**Hardev Singh Virk**

Professor of Eminence, Punjabi University, Patiala (Punjab) India.

E-mail: hardevsingh.virk @gmail.com

## **Introduction**

It is believed that Inter-faith dialogue will help the whole world to live in peace and harmony. There were conflicts and wars due to misunderstandings or misinterpretations of scriptures of other religions. The pioneer assembly to bring the religious leaders of the world together in a spirit of reconciliation was held in Chicago during 1893 under the banner of world Parliament of Religions. Swami Vivekananda participated in this assembly to represent Hindu religion.

Interfaith dialogue and religious pluralism are more relevant in the Indian context due to diversity of religions, languages and cultures. The first prophetic message of Guru Nanak after communion with God: "There is no Hindu no Musalman", emphasized the universal human spirit revealed for the first time in the history of world religions. Guru Gobind Singh repeated the message of Guru Nanak when he proclaimed that all humanity is one in spirit<sup>1</sup>:

mwns kl jwq sbY eyko pihcwnbo ]

Sikh religion is universal in its approach as reflected in the teachings of SGGS. Acceptance of religious pluralism and tolerance is the hallmark in the lives of Sikh Gurus and Sikh tradition in general. Guru Nanak was revered by the people of all Indian creeds as is evident from the phrase: "Guru Nanak Shah faqir, Hindu ka Guru, Musalman ka Pir". It is recorded in Janamsakhi that both Hindus and Muslims laid claim to the body of Guru on his death in Kartarpur. Guru Granth Sahib's essential concerns are for the whole humanity and Gurbani proclaims<sup>2</sup>:

The Bani of God's word is spoken by everyone.

bwxl pRB kl sB ko bolY]

According to Teja Singh<sup>3</sup>: "The holy Granth (SGGS) is the only inter-communal book in India, if not in the world." SGGS contains the verses of 36 contributors belonging to different parts of India and representing almost all cross-sections of medieval Indian society. Bhai Mardana, a Muslim, was a life-long companion of Guru Nanak. He never distinguished between Hindus and Muslims. When Guru Nanak was questioned in Baghdad about the superiority of Hindus or Muslims, his emphatic reply<sup>4</sup> was:

Without good deeds both will suffer.

SuB AmlW bwJhuM dovyN roel ]

It is unfortunate that the message of Sikh Gurus has been unconsciously or deliberately misinterpreted by both Indian and foreign scholars due to the theological language of the Hindus used in SGGS. When Sikhism came to Punjab, Brahminism interpreted it as its off-spring with a view to holding it in its tentacles<sup>5</sup>. According to Puran Singh<sup>6</sup>: "Hinduism was once intolerant to Buddhism; it is now intolerant to Sikhism because it threatens to change Hinduism vitally."

Contemporary Sikhism is becoming intensely aware of its ethno-religious, ethno-social, ethno-cultural, and ethno –political identity and corporate personality. Sikhism has to re-define its relatedness to Hinduism, as distinct from the earlier stress on rootedness in Hinduism. Sikh religion, despite its doctrinal newness and distinct identity, shares with the Indian commonwealth of religions certain recurring ideational archetypes that have shaped different cultures and civilizations arising in the Indian sub-continent<sup>7</sup>.

In my view, we have four categories of scholars commenting on the contribution of Sikh Gurus to Indian society. In the first category, one can include scholars who treat Sikhism as a Hindu reformist movement. In the second category, we can include scholars who treat Sikhism as a synthesis of Hinduism and Islam. There is a third category which considers Sikhism as a branch of *Bhakti* movement only. A new breed of Sikh scholars considers Sikhism as a unique religion with no link to Hinduism or Islam. There is lot of confusion in Sikh Studies due to these different approaches.

Our approach in this essay will be to establish the unique identity of Sikh religion and to explore its relationship with the mainstream Hinduism on the basis of some essential elements common to both the traditions. The unique character of Sikh religion is confirmed by the observation made by Prof. M. Mujeeb<sup>8</sup>, an eminent scholar of Aligarh Muslim University: "Guru Nanak was not a mere reformer. We know he was not a Hindu who appealed to the Hindu scriptures in order to reform Hindu society. We know he was not a Muslim trying to eradicate evils in Muslim society by appealing to the *Quran*. I do not find in his teachings any attempt at a reconciliation of Hinduism and Islam. In fact, he set both Hinduism and Islam aside to get to the source of religion itself. He was an originator, a founder."

The reason for misunderstanding Guru Nanak's message lies in the use of terms and concepts in his *bani* according to Grewal<sup>9</sup>: "The impression that Guru Nanak's religious ideas present a good deal of similarity to the ideas which one can easily discover in contemporary Islam and Hinduism has a strong basis in the terms and concepts used by Guru Nanak in his compositions; but this impression is quite misleading. In the context of his theological thought, current terms and

concepts undergo a significant change, so significant indeed that they acquire a new meaning.”

For example, the term *Rama* has been mostly used by the Sikh Gurus for God in SGGS and whenever they use it for Rama, the king of Ayodhya, the distinction is made crystal clear to remove any confusion. However, many Hindu scholars and journalists like Kuldip Nayar try to misinterpret this term, without understanding its implications, either out of ignorance or with a hidden purpose in their mind to denigrate the message of the Sikh Gurus. Blaming the present Akali leadership, Kuldip Nayar reports in the Tribune<sup>10</sup>: “Efforts have been made to argue that Lord Rama mentioned in Guru Granth Sahib is different from the one whom the Hindus worship. The intention is to draw a cleavage between the Hindus and the Sikhs for political ends”.

G.S. Talib has resolved this contradiction. According to Talib<sup>11</sup>, Sikh Gurus adopted the names like Rama and Krishna derived from Indian mythology for God as these were current among the Indian people and had become synonymous with God in common speech. Thus, *Rama*, the name of hero-prince in *Ramayana*, had become the most popular term for God. In SGGS, *Ram-Nam* means literally God’s name and implies devotion, prayer, meditation. *Rama* is used to designate God by Guru Nanak in Japuji<sup>12</sup>:

They neither die nor fall into illusion,  
In whose soul *Rama* (God) abides.  
nw Eih mrih n Twgy jwih]  
ijnkY rwmu vsY mn mwih]

## Concept of God

Some Indian and foreign scholars have misunderstood that the idea of Oneness of God preached by Guru Nanak was the result of the influence of Islamic teachings on him. But this appears to be wrong notion. The idea of Oneness of God<sup>13</sup> was evolved by Indian seers and philosophers even before the migration of Aryans, but it appears that religious leaders previous to Guru Nanak neglected to preach the spiritual realities to the Indian masses, who remained sunk in superstitions. They continued to worship not only gods and goddesses but animals, serpents, trees, etc. Guru Nanak realized that it was this weakness of Indian society that made them helpless in face of foreign invaders. Guru Nanak differed from Jains, Buddhists and most of the Hindu brand of philosophers by re-defining the Oneness of God by putting the numeral 1 before the open *Oora* (E) in mulmantra of SGGS. I believe this was a great revolutionary and a scientific innovation of Guru Nanak. The placing of numeral 1 before *Oamkar* (E), pronounced as *Ik-Oamkar*, expressed the unity and Oneness of God eternally. The unity of Godhead was the first article of his faith.

No school of Hindu philosophy believes that God is *Karta Purkh* in the sense implied by Guru Nanak. The Sankhya school of Hindu philosophy denies His existence and teaches that *Prakriti* creates the universe and *Purusha* has no role to play. The *Nayaya* and *Vaiseska* schools consider God as the efficient cause of the world but not its material cause. A different sequence is proposed by Sankra in his world famous *advaita* system of philosophy. Concept of God as *Nirguna – Saguna Brahman* is there, as in SGGS, but *Saguna Brahman* is represented by *Iswara*, the totality of all things that are created through the agency of *Maya*. Guru Nanak rejects the *advaita* school of thought in Japuji<sup>14</sup>:

“Hail to Thee from whom sprang Maya,  
The world and Brahma Vishnu and Shiva”

eykw mwel jugiq ivAwel iqin cyly prvwXu]  
ieku sMswrl ieku BMfwrl ieku lwey dlbwXu]

Guru Nanak discarded the worship of the whole pantheon of gods and goddesses of Hindu religion. He gave no importance to principal Vedic gods like Pusan, Indra, Rudra, Visnu and Agni, who were replaced later by the Trinity of Hindu gods: Brahma (the creator), Visnu (the preserver) and Siva (the destroyer). How can they liberate the Indian masses? They are all servants of the Supreme God and are crying to Him for His grace<sup>15</sup>:

Brahma, Visnu and Siva stand at His door,  
To serve the unfathomable and infinite Lord.  
And many others who are beyond count,  
Are seen crying at His door.

bRhmw ibsnu mhysu duAwrY] aUBy syvih AIK ApwrY]  
hor kyql dir dlsY ibllwdl mY gxq n AwvY kwel hy]

Guru Nanak’s God is absolute, eternally unchanging Formless one, *Nirankar*. He is inscrutable, boundless, self-existent, ineffable and beyond time. God is the sole creator, the sustainer and the destroyer of the universe. Guru Nanak’s God is both transcendent and immanent, pervading the microcosm as well as macrocosm. It is this God who is the object of Guru Nanak’s worship.

The idea of divine self-expression<sup>16</sup> is another revolutionary theological thought of Guru Nanak. The concepts of Truth (*sach*), the Name (*nam*), the Word (*sabda*), the Divine Preceptor (*guru*) and the Divine Order (*hukam*) form the key-concepts of divine self-expression. The Truth represents the eternal aspect of God, the Name refers to the object of communication, the Word to the medium of communication, the Divine Preceptor represents the voice of God in man himself

and the Divine Order is an all – embracing principle, comprehending the working of the physical as well as the moral world.

All these concepts are inter-linked in the *bani* of Sikh Gurus and these form the basis of Sikh view point of *Bhakti*. In Sikh religion, *bhakti* is addressed directly to God and not to any *avtar*. In fact, the very idea of incarnation of God is rejected in very strong terms in SGGS<sup>17</sup>:

Let that mouth be burnt, which says that our Lord (God) is subject to birth.  
so muKu jlau ijqu khih Twkru jonI ]

## Creation of the Universe

A detailed discussion on this topic is already given in the Chapter “Cosmological Ideas in Science and Religion”. However, some elaboration of Hindu view of Cosmology is being made on the basis of a recent paper by RC Verma<sup>18</sup>: “Evolution of the Universe and Concepts of Matter: Some Ancient Indian Views.”

Rigveda describes the universe as infinite and made up of Earth, the atmosphere and the sky. It also mentions about the Sun as light giver of the universe. In observational astronomy, Indian *rishis* studied the phenomena of eclipses and prepared calendars so much needed for their rituals. We find a plenty of theories of universe in the Indian literature. Pundit Madhusudan Ojha of Jaipur has recognized ten different schools of cosmology in India on the basis of *Nasadya Sukta* of Rigveda, the famous hymn of creation. In Vedic literature, one finds many creation myths relating to Indra, the chief of Vedic gods.

Upanishads put forward diverse theories of creation of the universe. *Chhandogya Upanishad* states: “Brahman desiring to be many, created *taijas*, *ap* and *kshiti*, and entered into these three.” Surprisingly, in these theories of creation, no creator is postulated for the purpose of creation. For instance, the creation process in *Brihadarnyak Upanishad* is described as follows: “In the beginning, water (primeval) alone existed, from water was born *Satya* (truth), *Satya* produced *Brahman* and so on.” *Katha Upanishad* gives priority to Fire: “Fire having entered the universe, assumed all forms. Fire was the First to evolve from the primal reality that from Fire came water, from water the earth.”

Vaisesika school of Indian philosophy proposed *parmanuvada* (atomic theory) for creation of the universe: “(i) There is an external universe independent of mind. (ii) This universe exists eternally, it was never created. (iii) Material things must be made up of *parmanus* of various elements, which are the permanent substance. (iv) Once the *mahabhutas* are produced one after the other, through the divine will (*sankalpa*) a big cosmic egg is produced out of the *parmanus* of five elements, (v) Destruction occurs when union of primary *parmanus* is broken.

Creation and destruction of universe continues adinfinitum. This process has got neither any beginning nor any end.”

There is a lot of confusion and diversification in the ideas about creation of the universe in Vedic, Upanishdic, Nayaya, Viseshika, Sankhya, Yoga, Mimamsa and Vedanta schools of Indian philosophy. Guru Nanak’s ideas about creation of the universe have been summed up in an earlier chapter. We do find some common ground between these two Indian traditions represented by SGGS and Rig Veda’s *Nasdaya Sukat*.

### **Concept of Transmigration, Salvation, Heaven and Hell**

The doctrine of transmigration of the soul or eschatology is common to both the religious traditions. Every religion has tried to explore the basic question: What becomes of human being after death? Sankra, the great Hindu philosopher, compares mankind to a plant. Like plant, it springs up, develops and returns finally to the earth. But as the seed of the plant survives, so also at death the works of a man remain as a seed which sown afresh in the realm of ignorance, gives rise to a new existence in exact correspondence with his character. This is the foundation of famous *karma* theory of transmigration. “What becomes of us after death?” can be answered in three ways: (i) annihilation, (ii) eternal retribution in heaven or hell, and (iii) transmigration. Most of the scientists believe in the first answer. Second answer appeals to the Semitic religious traditions. And for empirical solution of the problem, the third answer satisfies the Indian mind. The doctrine of soul’s migration forms the basis of moral law in this world.

The hymns of Rig Veda know nothing of migration of the soul. Idea of immortal life exists in many hymns of Rig Veda. The idea of heaven and hell is introduced in the Atharvaveda. The good are rewarded in heaven and the wicked are punished in the hell. Those who annoy the Brahmans are also condemned to hellish existence<sup>19</sup>:

Those who spit at Brahmans,  
Or cast on them the mucus of the nose,  
They sit there in pools of blood,  
Chewing their hair as food.

The concept of salvation or emancipation of soul (*atma*) has been a hallmark of Hindu philosophy. A man who is free from desires, his soul (*atma*) merges with God (*Brahman*). There is no transmigration for such an emancipated soul. He attains immortality<sup>20</sup>:

When every passion vanishes

That finds a home in the human heart,  
Then he who is mortal becomes immortal,  
here already he has attained to Brahman.

The soul (*atma*) of man is assigned four states in the Upanishads: (i) waking, (ii) dream sleep, (iii) deep sleep, i.e., dreamless sleep, in which the soul becomes one with Brahman and enjoys unsurpassable bliss, and (iv) the fourth state, usually called *turiya*, in which union with Brahman is continuous and perfect. The aim of the *Yoga* is to attain *turiya*, a state of the supreme bliss<sup>21</sup>:

The dreamer's knowledge is false,  
The sleeper knows nothing at all,  
Both go astray, where all this vanishes  
There the fourth state is reached.

In Sikh religion, the use of common terms and concepts of Indian origin, borrowed from Vedic, Upanishdic and Yogic systems, has created a lot of confusion in interpreting the message of SGGS. For example, Guru Nanak<sup>22</sup> has employed *turiya* term for the state of supreme bliss, but its attainment is through the medium of the Guru or *sadhsangat* and not by *Yoga*:

But the fourth state of supreme bliss,  
*Turiya*, is known only through the True Guru.  
qurlAwvsQw siqgur qy hir jwnu]

The Gurumukh attains the state of *turiya*,  
Taking to the shelter of the Saint's congregation.  
qurlAwvsQw gurmuiK pwelAY sMq sBw kl Et lhl]

The concepts of transmigration, salvation (*mukti* or *jeevan mukti*), heaven and hell do find a mention in the compositions of Sikh Gurus in SGGS. While there is too much stress on performing rituals, sacrifices, pilgrimage, purification, penance and all sorts of *karamkand* in Hindu religion to attain salvation or emancipation of the soul, the Sikh Gurus reject *Karamkand* and advocate service to society, humility and meditation as the means to attain salvation. In Sikh religion, salvation is possible while living in this world and enjoying all pleasures of this worldly life<sup>23</sup>:

O Nanak, meeting the True Guru,  
One comes to know the Perfect way.  
While laughing, playing, dressing and eating,  
One is liberated.  
nwnk siqguir ByitAY pUrI hovY jugiq]

hsidAw KylMidAw pYnMidAw KwvMidAw ivcy hovY  
mukiq]

Guru Nanak's conception of God's grace repudiates all presumption to salvation by mere human effort. What decides the issue of salvation (*mukti*) is God's grace (*nadar*). It is obvious that the idea of grace is meant to inculcate humility in one's approach to salvation. The salvation is not 'achieved' by man; it is 'bestowed' by God. Salvation is not 'other worldly' concept in Sikh religion, it has to be attained during this life. The idea of heaven and hell is there in SGGS but they do not look as charming or dreadful as in Hindu sacred texts (*Puranas*).

### **Ethics and Morality**

There are several religions which preach that God alone exists (*sat*). But if you examine their ethical system, you will find a lurking fear of some force which is other than God. Christianity and Islam have accepted this anti-God element of life, as *Satan* or the devil. A basic dualism has thus crept in those systems. Hinduism propagated the idea of *Ekam Satya*, that God alone is *Sat* (existent) but introduced the idea of *Maya* philosophically later on. *Maya* has thus become for the Hindus what evil or devil is for Christians and Muslims; a force anti – God. As a result of *Maya* concept, the Hindu code of conduct or ethical system is very much based on an avowed dualism. A dichotomy persists in their faith and action. It was left for the Sikh Gurus to remove this dualism from the active life<sup>24</sup>.

Guru Nanak is the first prophet of God in the history of world religions who removed the dualism and dichotomy between the spiritual life and empirical life of man. In fact, in Sikh religion, the spiritual salvation of man is linked to his social salvation<sup>25</sup>. It was Guru Nanak who laid and led the path of universal love and the emancipation of man without distinction of caste and creed. The objective of Guru Nanak's mission of love was to establish equality and fraternity among all human beings and to resist oppression by safeguarding the human rights and values. In unambiguous terms, he issued forth a call for his mission of love<sup>26</sup>:

If you want to tread the path of love,  
Come forward with your head on your palm.  
jau qau pRym Kylx kw cwau]  
isru Dir qll gll myrl Awau]

Sikh Gurus gave to love the importance that they gave to nothing else. It is the direct manifestation of God in us. In fact, the intensity of love in a person shows the level of his spiritual attainment. Guru Gobind Singh epitomized 'Love' as the primary condition for meeting the God<sup>27</sup>:

Listen ye all, I am going to tell the Truth,



Those who love shall meet the Lord (God).  
swc khuMN sun lyhu sBY,  
ijn pRym kIE iqn hl pRB pwieE]

Guru Nanak brought a complete reversal of the socio-religious life and values of his time<sup>28</sup>. Against life negation and withdrawal from life, he recommended life-affirmation and complete social participation. He accepted a householder's life against monasticism and asceticism. He gave religious sanctity to married life and equality to women. Guru Nanak accepted and practiced social equality and the brotherhood of man against the rigidity of Hindu *varan ashram dharma*. Asceticism and *Ahimsa*, the fundamental doctrines of all Indian religions, were both rejected by Guru Nanak. Hence, a new moral and social order was established in Sikh society. According to Grewal<sup>28</sup>: "The socio-political order of his day had lost legitimacy in the eyes of Guru Nanak, because it had lost its religious roots. By implication, a new social order was needed, based on a new religious dispensation."

The Sikh Gurus have given a new moral code of conduct to their disciples which must awaken the soul in them. The saint in Sikhism should be more human than the ordinary man. The Sikh militarism is a part and parcel of the Sikh creed and the saint should play the role of a soldier, in response to the exigency of the situation.

In Sikh religion, the status of women is equal to men in all respects and there are numerous verses in SGGS to glorify the role of women in society. We need not elaborate the status of women in Hindu society. In the caste order of the Brahmans, a woman had been classed with the *Shudras*. For Sankra, woman is the gateway to hell. In the Upanishads, woman and *Sudra* are forbidden to recite Vedic *mantras*<sup>30</sup>:

If a woman or a *Sudra* learns the Savitiri formula,  
The Lakshmi formula, the Pranava,  
One and all go downwards after death.  
Therefore, let these never be communicated to such!  
If anyone communicates these to them,  
They and the teacher alike go downwards after death.

Hinduism is like a great pyramid of Indian religions and cultures. Despite revolutionary changes introduced by Sikh religion in Indian pyramid, it remains a part and parcel of Indian civilization and culture. Sikh religion must play its destined role in inter-faith dialogues to promote world peace during the new millennium.

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