

# Faith vis-à-vis Rationality: A Sikh perspective

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DO FAITH AND RATIONALITY GO SIDE by side? Can a person be believer and rational at the same time? Faith stands on love, trust and complete submission, and is a “firm belief in something for which there is no proof” in dictionary terms. Rationality, contrary to this, stands on reasoning and asks for evidence.

The basic concepts of ‘Faith’ and ‘Rationality’ look so distant that ‘religion’, the express repository of faith, apparently becomes hostile to those who keep a fundamental rational approach.

It was the transcendent vision of the Guru Sahiban that in addition to making Sikhism to be perceived with the traditional approach of faith and belief, instilled the highest level of rationality into it. With the advent of this reformation, the way religion was perceived and practiced in the society was changed. Religion was freed from the clutches of those who claimed to be the only authority over it; it was no more a fantasy accessible through the hands of the entrenched ‘care takers’ of the religious institutions, but was a direct relationship of the creation with its Creator.

Introducing such a revolutionary concept to the society was no less than a war, the price of which was paid by Guru Sahibs with their own martyrdoms. The philosophy instituted by Guru Nanak, was constituted by Guru Arjun in the form of Adi Granth, and later organized and inscribed by Guru Gobind Singh by the formation of Khalsa [*Panth*]. This evolution of Sikh faith beckoned a lot of traditions and symbolisms. Seeing everything superficially, to a lay man these traditions might look indistinguishable from those rituals which Guru Sahib themselves fought against, but there is a core difference between them.

Recently, I had a two hour interactive session with Danish kids about Sikhism in a school here in Denmark. I showed one overhead slide where it was written ‘*Guru Nanak rejected ritualism*’. Then in another slide I showed a picture of a Sikh woman carrying Sri Guru Granth Sahib (SGGS) on her head. A student asked me a question “Isn’t carrying SGGS on the head a kind of ritualism?” I was impressed by his question and his level of critique. I told him that there is a lot of symbolism in this. If this woman is carrying Sri Guru Granth Sahib on her head, she is actually giving respect to those 36 contributors to this holy book, from different social, religious and economic class, some of whom didn’t have any place in the society. So it is a symbolism of equality. Of course, if this woman thinks that just by carrying the holy Granth on her head, she would get place in ‘heaven’, then that is a blind faith.

Another youth interrupted me when I was talking about the *Amrit* ceremony. He wanted to know if this was also not a kind of ritual. I could understand their curiosity and told them that these traditions, started by Guru Sahibs, were not meant to engulf the Sikhs into any kind of ‘rituals’, but were used as the media to give strong messages of social equality to the masses. *Amrit* ceremony is symbolic of the concept of ‘Saint-Soldier’, it is symbolic of social equality. Whereas Guru Nanak broke the ‘barrier’ between the Creator and its creation, Guru Gobind Singh went a step ahead in bringing the ‘teacher’ and the ‘student’ on the same platform [*Waho*

*Waho Gobind Singh Aape Gur Chela*]. These were some of the unusual steps towards social equality which Guru Sahibs took at that time.

Today the Sikh youth is also not spared by the hue and cry for utmost rationality. It is a good sign; but we have to be very cautious if we are not being carried away by the same philosophy and definition of rationalism which the communists and atheists talk about. Acceptance of rationalistic view should not be at the expense of our traditions and heritage, for these traditions are the gifts of our Guru Sahibs, who themselves rejected rituals which were based on blind-faith. But of course the youth has to be considerate that they do not stray from the true essence of these traditions, because this is the point when these traditions will be converted to mere rituals and faith won't hold any credibility.

This reminds me of an incident at the Gurdwara in the University in Amritsar, where I was asked by a new comer, what I thought about Sikhs taking the '*charan dhoor*', 'kissing the *manji*', 'bowing in front of the Guru Granth Sahib again and again', etc. That was a genuine question, which concerned a lot of youngsters; and hence needed a genuine answer. And not getting a reasonable reply made them stay away from Sikhi. The only answer which I could think of, at that moment, was based on 'the expression of love' [*shraddha*]. I told him, we all love our mothers, but the intensity and our ways of expression are different. Some prefer to hug, others kiss and hug again and again, and some others just refrain from either of these. Similarly, we have to see everything which we do and which others do in the Gurdwara with the eyes of 'expression of love'

In Sikhism, faith and belief rest on foundation of 'trust' and *Shraddha*. This expression can neither be defined nor controlled. When we love someone to an extent, we also start loving everything which relates to that person, even some materialistic things. But it is not called superstition. There might be a thin line differentiating faith from blind faith, but it is very much visible. If we love our Guru, we might do everything to express it, but these are personal decisions, hence not written or defined anywhere, and neither a way to any kind of "*moksha*" or reward. But once love goes out of our expression and greed comes in, a 'faith' becomes a 'blind-faith', and everything converts to ritualism and superstition.

It was because of belief, faith and trust in the Guru that five Sikhs stood up and offered themselves on the Vaisakhi of 1699. We can't see this with the eyes of 'rationality' alone. The 'rational' view of Bhai Taru Singh's martyrdom, when he preferred to part away with his scalp instead of his hair, would be his cutting the hair while in custody and growing it again when released!

Similarly Guru Sahib asked us not to go to pilgrimages and bathe in rivers and ponds. But still Guru Sahib constructed *Sarovars* and *boulees*. To an ordinary eye this might look like hypocrisy. But, again, we have to understand the teaching which we are getting out of it. There was one place where people were not allowed to bathe in the same place because of their different social status; and here Guru invites them to come and bathe in the same pond irrespective of their social class. This is the highest level of equality which the society could have been bestowed upon by the Gurus at that time.

If it was only rationality and rules which Guru Sahib wanted to talk about then they would have written these rules in a few pages very specifically. Having written

1430 pages in the forms of inspired hymns was, in itself, a message that there was a lot more in Sikhism than rationality alone which Guru Sahibs wanted to preach. Sikhs are not critical about rational view, but they are also not willing to accept a totalitarian view of rationality which does not have a base in love and faith, and which does not respect Sikh moral traditions and heritage.

But, again, the onus is on us Sikhs, to interpret our philosophy and traditions correctly. It's our responsibility to inculcate the heritage, bestowed upon us by the Guru, in our coming generations. We can't simply reject the traditions either because we fail to understand the essence of these, or because of the phobia of some other faith.

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