

COLE SAHIB: Story of a Multifaith Journey

By W Owen Cole

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A review by Gurmukh Singh (UK)

This remarkable book, based on intensive first hand teaching experience -from primary school to the university level - is about the evolution of Religious Education (RE) in an increasingly multifaith Britain over the last 50 years. It gives significant policy guidance regarding the future direction of RE.

The author, Dr W Owen Cole has been a much respected figure in multifaith education circles. He is a strong believer in teaching religion as a “broad study of beliefs and values” so that by the time the student has completed education he or she is not only ‘literate and numerate’ but also “religiate”. He has written many well researched books and, even after retirement from service, continues to be an authoritative commentator and adviser on RE issues.

Dr Cole believes that religion should **be experienced from within**. A good student of religion should feel what religion means to a believer. As he puts it, “Empathy is not a skill that is acquired naturally or easily.” That is what this book is about: experiencing other faiths from within and not studying them from outside as “them and us”. Often, by studying our neighbouring religions we come to discover in own tradition what we value most in others. We discover that “faiths have sufficient inner riches to meet any needs”. In another sense, a good student is encouraged to ask the same questions of own religious tradition what he or she might ask of others on visiting their places of worship.

In the **preface** he tells us that, deep interest in RE from the age of 23 years (1954), his “multifaith journey” from 1968, and his own “spiritual pilgrimage” are the three “intertwining strands” of this religious autobiography.

According to the jacket, he started as a “very conventional Christian” and his dogmatic approach changed to pragmatic exploration through experience. However, despite his upbringing in a manse (clergyman’s house), there is no doubt that his father’s liberal approach to matters of religion, did influence his own approach in later life. As he says, his religious upbringing was not “fanatical”.

His early life, studies and teaching experience is covered in the first 5 chapters. It is interesting to note that he moved around in towns with growing multi-religious communities, like Muslims, Sikhs and Hindus in addition to the earlier Jewish settlers. His was the ideal environment for learning about new religio-social groups and he made full use of the study opportunities on offer.

Born in Sheffield on 22 September 1931, Cole was brought up in Bradford from the age of three (1934). He mentions his first sight of a black man at Hull as a 4 year old when he realised that the world was not “entirely white”! His grandma pointed out the black man on other side of the road that if he was not good “that black man would get me”; much as a Punjabi mother would point out a Pathan (or a Rasha) in my pre-partition childhood in

Punjab. In most societies xenophobia becomes part of the human psyche in childhood, albeit, for well intentioned protective parental reasons. It takes a life time to overcome that. As we see in some extreme right wing groups, not even a life time is enough to make one realise that the distant stranger, when he or she comes closer, is really a brother or a sister. Notably the book concludes with a Sufi story to that effect.

When time came to register for National Service Cole decided to be a 'conscientious objector' and joined the Quakers' Friends Ambulance Service (FAS). He came into contact with Quaker belief that God is in everyone, which "explains why Quakers sit in a circle or square facing each other during their meeting for worship. That is where God is, in all other people besides themselves. Hence too their opposition to slavery, war, gender discrimination, and an organised ministry." A Sikh would read the above with much appreciation as part of his or her religious belief also. For Owen Cole that also "meant that feminism was not new when its time came".

He gained experience of teaching children from diverse ethnic backgrounds and problem children. He had his first experience of visiting a mandir, gurdwara and mosque at Newcastle and realised that the sort of RE he had in mind would require satisfactory teaching literature and translations of scriptures from other religions.

A lecture on the Sikh religion by John Hinnels stressed that it is not a synthesis of Hinduism and Islam; that, contrary to popular belief, it is not a "militant faith", it believes in gender equality and rejects caste. At Leeds, Owen Cole met Piara Singh Sambhi "who remained a close friend until his death in on 20 November 1992". They co-authored a book: "The Sikhs: Their Religious Beliefs and Practices" (Routledge & Kegan Paul Ltd, London 1978). Based on mainstream Sikh ideology, the book is perhaps the best RE publications in the UK.

A "most precious memory" for Owen Cole is to do with the need to promote pride in self-identity in a multi-ethnic society. On one occasion he told a mixed class of 9-year olds the story of the Sikh Good Samaritan, Bhai Kanhaiya. To quote, "what amazed me was the response it drew from the eight or nine Sikhs in the class, Not only were they attentive, sitting up straight, but I swear they each grew by about a foot. They looked around the class at their peers with pride. Someone had told a story about them!". He is believes in community identity as well as being responsive to British citizenship.

A large part of the book is devoted to getting to know the diverse faith communities through first hand experience of their religious places, practices and social life. His visit to a gurdwara in Leeds is described in some detail. Extended family system, relationships and responsibilities, the concept of "izzat", arranged marriages etc are discussed with appreciation from within.

In February-March 1973, Owen Cole had his first experience of all aspects of life in India and Pakistan. He made extensive and detailed notes of what to us are familiar scenes, social situations and way of life on the sub-continent. He was well received wherever he stayed, mostly with Sikh, Hindu and Muslim families. He fully participated in the way of life, gave talks, got used to Indian time keeping – time waits for the audience and not the other way around – bribery in officialdom and so on.

In UK, church buildings have been sold to other religious groups. When he took some students to a mandir in Leicester he noted the words above the entrance , "William Carey Memorial Chapel". He writes "might he the famous missionary to India, have appreciated the irony of the empire striking back?"

During a later visit to India, Owen Cole joined Professor Harbans Singh at Punjabi University Patiala to work with him on the **Encyclopaedia of Sikhism**. For one month he toured India. He saw Indianised version of Christianity which continues to practise caste hierarchy. **One highlight of this visit to India was when he was a guest of the editor of “the celebrated Sikh Review”.** He comments, **“So far as I know it is the only regular Sikh publication of its kind”.** He met the Satguru of the Ravidasis at Varanasi and it seems even in that year (1983) Ravidasis were preparing to replace Guru Granth Sahib with a scripture of their own in Hindi.

The final Chapter 15 sums up where Dr Owen Cole, the multifaith teacher and the spiritual pilgrim, stands today.

In the study of eastern religions, Owen Cole notes the absence of the concept of original sin and an evil entity or the devil or Satan competing with God. He suggests that symbolism in religion requires “mature interpretation”. For example, traditional belief in hell is more likely “a political and religious creation of human beings designed to keep people in fear and order so that they might be obedient to church and state”. He describes heaven as a state of eternity. “Eternity is a spiritual state to which many of my Indian friends give the name “Anand”, bliss, and believe that the liberated soul will be reabsorbed into the loving God from whom it originated.” He feels unease about evangelism. The path to God is the path of love. That is the basis of any faith.

His frustration with the lack of vision and adequate response by the UK’s religious and political establishment to the RE needs of a rapidly changing population mix, comes through. The establishment is still “clinging to the world of yesterday” by marginalising other faiths, treating them as “guests” and expecting them to “soon go home”! He writes, “This tokenism is unacceptable and dangerous as it can result in alienation, especially of the young. A social and spiritual revolution is required.” His views call for a major review of the UK RE system. There is much more which challenges tradition and provokes thought; but the author comes down firmly on the side of faith in a loving God, no matter of what description, or called by which Name.

Conclusion: Long paragraphs and sentences, UK educational jargon and acronyms, absence of dates to easily follow the chronological order of events, and names without any introduction, tend to distract the reader. Nevertheless, this is a most useful and thought-provoking publication for those interested in Religious Education in schools, for interfaith representatives and for policy makers in the field of multifaith education.

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**SHRI GURU TEGH BAHADUR –
An Icon of Tyag, Bairag & Anurag
AND DEVELOPMENT OF SIKHISM**

By Sampuran Singh Narang

**Published by Guru-deep Prakashan
C4-98/2, Safdarjung Development Area,
New Delhi – 110 016**

Pages 90 Price Rs 100/- (Soft over)

Reviewed by Avtar Singh

Dr Sampuran Singh Narang’s latest book is a valuable addition for all seekers of truth. Earlier he has been engaged in humanitarian services rooted in *Gurbani*. His two earlier

books: “Japji Saheb” and “Rehras Saheb and Kirtan Sohila” have been useful for beginners. A special feature has been that *gurbani* verses (in both Gurmukhi and Hindi) along with their transliteration are juxtaposed with translation, into simple English, for the convenience of uninitiated.

This time again Dr Narang follows a similar layout. The only difference is that this book, rendered in 21 chapters explains at length various aspects of the ninth Guru’s life and teachings with specific emphasis on his martyrdom, A UNIQUE SACRIFICE for human rights

Quotes from *gurbani*, and poets like Bhai Nand Lal and Bhai Gurdas - add to the interest, so also brief references to Sikh history. An equally significant aspect is that the writer has thoughtfully summarised the Sikh philosophy, with its unquestionable stand on truth and human rights, backed up – with ultimate sacrifice for the safeguard of humanitarian values. Photos are a taboo in Sikhism, but the artistic painting of Guru Tegh Bahadur ji – taken from Gurdwara Sisganj Saheb, Delhi - and a short life-sketch enhance the importance of this book.

In the present times when many leading national and international organizations are working together to enable human society to live freely according to the tradition of their religion and culture, this book is a handy volume to make readers aware of the glorious Guru’s martyrdom for the cause of justice. Sikh institutions and libraries could benefit by this addition for the benefit of general readership.

