

Science and Religion

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As science has progressed, along with widespread education and the broad impact of technology in our lives, most people would like to base their beliefs on rationality and common sense. Younger people, in particular, have generally learned to be more skeptical and are unwilling to just accept what they are told without questioning the reasoning behind it.

Many younger members are dropping out of traditional religions because they are required to believe in religious dogma which are often at odds with what they learn in science. Brought up on rationalism, they reject blind faith and ritualism. The contradictions between religious dogma and science are harder and harder for today's youth to swallow.

The various descriptions of the origin of the world and of mankind in different religious scriptures, for example, have become hard to take literally as scientists extend their knowledge of the earth's history, and learn more about the structure and origins of the universe through advances in geology, astronomy and cosmology.

Organized religions and traditional priestly structures generally have a vested interest in promoting blind faith in rituals and the myths and dogma associated with their faiths in order to maintain their credibility and authority. As scientific discoveries and technical advances make some of the old ideas obsolete, they are in the role of defending the existing beliefs and resisting the new until their positions are no longer tenable.

The resistance to the belief that the Earth moved around the Sun, rather than the Earth as the center of the Universe, and the persecution of Galileo by the Church is well known. The ongoing controversies about the theory of evolution and stem cell research illustrate the threat to cherished belief systems posed by the advances of science and technology. New scientific and technological thinking poses much less of a challenge in the case of Sikhi for several reasons.

Guru Nanak took a firm down-to-earth pragmatic approach to religion, that actually encouraged his audience to question irrational practices and beliefs that they had been following in the name of religion. His attitude towards irrational beliefs is illustrated very nicely in this account of an important lesson by Guru Nanak at Hardwar, a major Hindu holy pilgrimage center. Arriving at Hardwar during one of his missionary trips, Guru Nanak saw some pilgrims bathing in the holy Ganges river who were scooping up water with their hands and throwing it to the East as an offering to the Sun god in a traditional Hindu ritual. When questioned by Guru Nanak, they told him that they were sending the water to their ancestors. Nanak joined them, but he started throwing the water in the opposite direction, to the West. Asked what he was up to, he told them he was watering his fields. When his reply was met with derision, he explained that if the water they were sprinkling could reach the Sun and their ancestors in the afterworld, surely the water could get to his farm which was just a couple of hundred miles away. There are several other similar stories from his life, and the same message is found in his writings in the Guru Granth Sahib.

As with many other prophets and saints, there are several accounts of miraculous happenings around the lives of Guru Nanak and the Gurus following him. However, none of these are covered in the Guru Granth Sahib, or considered to be an essential part of the belief system of Sikhi. We are specifically directed to pay attention to the teachings of the Gurus, not to be obsessed on stories about their lives:

ਗੁਰਿ ਕਹਿਆ ਸਾ ਕਾਰ ਕਮਾਵਹੁ ॥
ਗੁਰ ਕੀ ਕਰਣੀ ਕਾਹੇ ਧਾਵਹੁ ॥
ਨਾਨਕ ਗੁਰਮਤਿ ਸਾਚਿ ਸਮਾਵਹੁ ॥ ੨੭॥

[SGGS, p 933]

Practice that which the Guru has ordained. Why are you chasing after the Guru's actions?

O Nanak, it is through following the Guru's Teachings that you shall merge into the True Lord. ॥ 27 ॥

The Guru Granth Sahib focuses on spiritual, moral and ethical issues, it does not profess to address scientific topics such as the specific details of the origin of the universe or its end, which are properly the domain of science. There are references to creation that are mystical and poetical, and generally in the mode of marveling at the splendor and grandeur of it all rather than telling us what we should believe in. And many of these do turn out to be surprisingly consistent with modern scientific theory. Guru Nanak describes God as the creator of countless universes, and he speaks of a multitude of suns, earths, and stars. He speaks clearly of the void that preceded the creation of the universe, and he asserts that no one knows the date, day and time when the universe was created, when it will end or under what circumstances. There are many mythical references in the Guru Granth Sahib that are based on existing stories, beliefs or terminology of Hindu or Muslim origin. These are all used for their illustrative values, and are not to be taken literally. You are expected to use common sense and judgment, or *vichaar*, in studying the Guru Granth Sahib, along with a deep faith in the Guru of course. In fact, we cannot embrace the teachings of the Guru Granth Sahib without using our critical faculties.

The absence of an organized church-like structure or a central authority analogous to the Pope means that each individual embarking on the path of Sikhi ultimately has to take the responsibility of interpreting the teachings of the Guru Granth Sahib to answer to his or her questions or doubts.

The bottom line is that to follow the path shown by Guru Nanak, you are not required to believe in any miraculous phenomena, irrational dogma or superstition that directly contradict scientific facts. It is very easy to be a devout Sikh and at the same time be a scientist or technologist – there is no conflict to overcome.

A Religion Run by Lay People – Without Clergy

Guru Nanak was very critical of the hypocrisy and superficial piety of priests and religious leaders and organizations, whose actual practices had strayed from the basic messages of the founders of the faiths. Often religious organizations and classes are driven by a desire to preserve their own positions of power and wealth. They add unnecessary complexity and obscurity to religion and keep their followers tied up in ritual practices rather than promote the true spiritual principles underlying their faiths. Fear, ignorance and guilt are their tools to keep the faithful in line.

Sikhism has no organized church hierarchy along the lines of the Christian or Jewish Churches, nor a hereditary priestly class as in Hinduism. Any Sikh man or woman can conduct religious services, or address a sermon or discourse to a congregation; it is a religion run by lay people. Each individual can go directly to the scripture, the Guru Granth Sahib, to seek answers to their spiritual questions. This does put the responsibility on the individual – there is nobody to act as an intermediary or to atone for your sins.

The establishment of Sri Guru Granth Sahib as the eternal living Guru by Guru Gobind Singh was a unique and creative construct that provides a resilient framework for ongoing

evolution and survival of Sikhi. He decreed that the role played by the human Guru, since Guru Nanak, would henceforth be played by the combination of the *Granth* and *Panth*. The *Granth* or Guru Granth Sahib would provide eternal spiritual guidance, while the *Panth*, which may be defined as the body of Sikhs acting together and in consonance with the teachings of the Granth Sahib, could make decisions on issues that are specific to the situation at any given time. This provides a unique paradigm for the evolution of Sikhi for all time. It avoids the structures of church and priesthood, which have been the bane of organized religion because such organized structures end up pursuing their own vested interests and distort the original concept and purpose of the founders of their religions.

This is very analogous to the democratic framework consisting of a constitution and the electorate, which has served the United States so well for the last three hundred years. Just like democracy, the Sikhi framework of Granth and Panth can be messy and chaotic and it is often misused, but it is also resilient and has the capacity of self-correction and recovery.

Conclusion

The Guru Granth Sahib, which embodies the message of Guru Nanak is a universal world-scripture authored by multiple spiritually enlightened beings with varying religious backgrounds. As we have seen, it has something of great value to offer mankind as we all grapple with the challenges of the third millennium, at the level of both the individual and of society.

A few words of introspection for the Sikh Community: how is it that so few people outside the Sikh community are even aware of the vast treasure of spiritual, moral and social insights contained in its 1430 pages? We have to admit that the Sikh community has not done a very good job of sharing it with the rest of the world.

I believe that the Guru Granth Sahib is the legacy of mankind as a whole, not something owned by just the Sikhs. Sikhs should look upon themselves as caretakers of this heritage. We need to make it a lot more accessible to non-Sikhs through better translations and other related materials in English as well as other languages. Sikh Gurdwaras should also make a concerted effort to reach out to a broader audience through outreach activities, and programs and services in English or other local languages. Sikhs should also participate much more energetically in interfaith activities following the example of Guru Nanak.

I want to briefly mention some areas that the Sikh community needs to discuss and address:

- Need for clear separation between Sikhi and Punjabi culture. By mixing the two, we create a barrier for non Sikhs, and for young Sikhs, particularly in the Sikh Diaspora, to relate to Sikhi.
- Strong resistance to use of English, or other languages besides Punjabi for religious services - see above.
- Signs of rising rigidity and religiosity on the part of many Sikhs that is at odds with the liberal and broadminded attitude of Guru Nanak.
- Stress on the uniqueness of Sikhism, and the differences from other faiths, instead of the universal themes that unite us all.
- Significant gaps between Sikhi as taught by Guru Nanak and the actual practices.
- Reemergence of elements of ritualism, dogma, superstition and even caste consciousness.
- Ritual worship of the Guru Granth Sahib, approaching idolatry, often replaces the much more difficult task of studying and reflecting on the words contained in it, and striving to actually live our lives in accordance with its teachings.

It is important to continually test current Sikh practices and beliefs against the original teachings of Guru Nanak and the Gurus who followed him which are enshrined in the Guru Granth Sahib, and to work towards ensuring that we do not depart from the basic principles of his universal and timeless message even as Sikhi evolves to meet the needs of a changing world. Fortunately, the availability of the authentic message in the form of Guru Granth Sahib, and the authority that Sikhi gives to the individual to go directly to the source, make it possible for us to do this. Furthermore, it is the responsibility of each of us, as members of the Panth, to address this issue since there is no Pope or Church to whom we can leave this task.

