

Dr. Noel Q. King [1922-2009] - An Obituary

DR. TARLOCHAN SINGH NAHAL

Dr. Noel Q. King, the legendary philosopher, historian and savant, who illumined the academic and literary circles in N. America for half a century, passed away on February 1, 2009 at his home in California.

Born in Rawalpindi in 1922, of missionary parents, his awareness of Sikhism has been a life-long passion. His great grandfather served as a veterinary surgeon in the Khalsa Army during the rule of Maharaja Ranjit Singh, in early 19th century. His father, William King, laid telegraph lines across northern India. The youthful Noel King moved with family from place to place, experiencing oriental multi-culturalism.

In 1940, Noel King joined the British Army during World War II. He served in India, Burma, and Europe. He received a bachelor's degree in Theology, and an M.A. degree in history from Oxford University. In 1954 he got his Ph.D. (History and Theology) from the University of Nottingham.

Dr. King taught in several universities all over the world, including the Punjabi University, University of Ghana, Nottingham, Oxford, Uganda University Papua/New Guinea and, finally, University of California (Santa Cruz). He was among the most distinguished scholars with a deep knowledge of Christianity, Islam, Sikhism and Jainism. He wrote eleven books and published dozens of scholarly articles for Encyclopaedias and Academic Journals.

He taught at University of California at Santa Cruz from in 1967 to 1991 as Professor of History and Comparative Religion, later honoured as Professor Emeritus. On his retirement, the Noel Q. King Lecture was established in 1992 to honor the legendary Teacher - and Scholar. This annual lecture is presented by the Committee for the Advancement of Religious Studies at UCSC. Dr. King was instrumental in providing foundation courses and a comparative framework for those interested in religious- studies, major as well as for students who wanted to learn about religion in an academic setting. He inspired many young scholars throughout his academic career.

He guided many students in their research on Sikh history and supervised their dissertations. He was the only Western scholar who stood with the Sikhs through thick and thin, and fearlessly wrote against those who tried to distort the Sikh history in the name of academic research. He was honored for his services to Panth at the 1995 *Vishav Sikh Samelan* in Amritsar. There he also received recognition from Jathedar, Sri Akal Takht. I was privileged, alongwith Dr. Raghbir Singh Bains, to be his students and received doctorate degrees in Sikhism. Both of us have been honored by Sri Akal Takhat Sahib.

Dr. King was a soft-spoken person. Scholarly terms and Latin phrases describing theological concepts and unique historical events came to him effortlessly, and his demeanor and presence created a unique aura that was both uplifting and captivating. I have never seen any scholar, who, in an instant, using his vast knowledge of the world history and comparative religious studies, could bring out historical gems related to the Sikh history. Yet, he was always humble and respectful of others and he supported academic and historical search.

A great teacher, scholar and friend of the Khalsa, his veneration for the Khalsa was profound. He donated money regularly to San Jose Sikh Gurdwara and other institutions. He also helped Sikhs in many other ways.

My last visit to him was only three weeks before he passed away. By this time he was quite frail, but still as graceful as ever in his demenour. During this visit, I had the opportunity to meet with his eldest son, Francis King who was visiting him from England. A former Diplomat in the British government, he served in various countries, including India. Like his father, he too has close relationship with the Sikhs. He told me that he was a diplomat in New Delhi when Indira Gandhi was killed in October 1984. Tens of thousands of Sikhs were massacred in a 'government sponsored' carnage. A Sikh family lived next door to his residence. They told Francis that their life and honor was in danger and they needed his help. He gladly agreed to provide sanctuary.

Dr. King had the highest esteem for Sri Guru Granth Sahib and Sikh Gurus and often quoted Gurbani. Before leaving for his world safari about 6 years ago, he asked me to bring along a *Nitnem Gutka* (Daily Sikh Prayer book) so he could read it. He used to travel every year and visit several countries, until about three years ago, when his health did not allow him to travel. His first preference was always to stay with a Sikh family whether it was in the US, India, Africa, or Canada because he trusted them greatly. He had friends all over the globe among all religious communities. He spoke several languages, including Punjabi, Hindi, Urdu and Latin.

Dr. King is survived by his wife Laurie (a well-known novelist), three sons (Francis, Jerome, Nathan), three daughters (Clare, Naomi and Zoe) and 11 grandchildren.

