

A 'Do-It-Yourself' Religion

I.J. SINGH* AND ARDAMAN SINGH®

* Head & Coordinator, Deptt. of Anatomy, New York University. [2414 Capri Place, N. Bellmore, NY 11710. USA]

® Email: asmadan@aol.com

IT SEEMS THAT THERE ARE TWO kinds of people in this world. One kind make every thing look simple, the other kind discover in the simplest things complexities that would make Rube Goldberg proud.

Listen to some of the *granthis*, *ragis*, and other speakers in Gurudwara, exploring ideas in Sikhism. They repeatedly overawe us with the admonition that Sikhism is a difficult path that requires extensive study and understanding of religious scriptural complexities. Well, no path is easy, and the exploration of scripture and philosophy is necessary. But, then, they say something that sticks in the throat. They invariably claim that the message of Sikhism is not simple or easy to understand; it requires scholarly, professional *granthis* and *ragis* to bring the meaning home to ordinary folks like us. Explicating scientific theories requires professionally trained scientists, and explaining engineering requires trained engineers. Similarly, they assert, explaining the complexities of the Sikh way of life requires scholars, *granthis* and the like.

In fact, we have read a scholar of Sikhism strongly aver that physicians should stick to their own bailiwick, engineers to theirs and traders to trading, while the business of Sikhism should be left strictly to those who are professionally trained in it. To us this means that unless they are professionally trained for it, lay Sikhs should kill all curiosity they may have about the religion that they so proudly follow. And that doesn't sound very sensible.

It seems to us that if there *is* one thing that the Gurus set out to do it was to make the mysteries of religion intelligible and available to ordinary people who are curious and receptive enough to explore it themselves. The Gurus freed the teaching of its dependency on the language that not many understood and from a professional clergy that controlled its flow. Indeed, before Guru Nanak appeared on the scene, the scriptural languages of Hinduism and Islam - Sanskrit and Arabic – had become the respective domain of the Brahmins and Mullahs. When this clergy captured the language, they held the teachings, ideas and philosophy prisoners in their hot little hands. An ordinary person would then approach the religion only if the *Brahmin* or *Mullah* let him, and only as far as the clergy would allow.

Prior to the time that Guru Nanak trod the earth over five hundred years ago, every Hindu household had a family priest, a Brahmin known as "Purohit". Caste system regulated Indian society. Most people had no say, because of their lower caste or poor economic status. Not entirely identical, but a similar system existed amongst the Muslims as well, except that instead of a Brahmin Purohit it was a Mullah or Qazi and instead of the higher caste Hindus, there were the ruling aristocracy.

Brahmins and Mullahs preached rituals that perpetuated ignorance. Higher caste Hindus and the privileged class Muslims became equal partners in this sinister scheme to keep the majority of people ignorant and subservient.

Purohits would sell indulgences and assure high class Hindus that praying to stone idols (*Thakurs*) of gods and goddesses while keeping the Purohit and other Brahmins well paid would guarantee salvation in the next world. To the lower caste Hindus, Purohits would feed the theory of Karma. The essence of the theory claims that these people are –destined to serve their higher caste masters because of their bad karma in a previous life and that, if they served their masters well in this life, their next life would be in a higher caste and, therefore, better.

In both Hindu and Islamic societies, the female existed primarily to produce more children and serve the males. Any inquisitive person who raised uncomfortable questions was quickly branded a heretic, possessed by witches or demons, or ignorant of the laws of Dharma or Imaan. Purohit—Education and economic opportunities were unavailable to most. Primarily both Muslim and Hindu codes aimed at promoting docility and obedience.

Guru Nanak set out to revolutionize the world and empower the powerless by identifying himself with the dispossessed and the downtrodden. Said Nanak, “nlc; aMdir nlc j;it, nlcl hU ait nlcu> n;nk itn kE sMg s;iq viDA; isPu ikA rlsu> ijqE nlc sm;llain itqE ndir terl bKsls> (isrl r;gu mhl; 1 pMn; 15”)

Nanak openly questioned his Purohit, his teachers and elders of society about injustice and misguided rituals. For this, Nanak tells us he was ridiculed by both Hindu and Muslim clerical hierarchy and was predictably branded as a man possessed or crazy: “koXI AKE Butn; ko khE bet;l;> koXI AKE Adml n;nku vec;r;> - (m;rU mhl; 1 pMn; 991”).

But Guru Nanak persisted in his mission. A new religion, “Sikhism” was born. It was the religion of the masses - of the householders, and ordinary people, like Bhai Lalo. Sikhism did not exclude anyone; instead it encouraged racial harmony, caste and gender equality. It taught that God, Dharma and Imaan are as much in the grasp of ordinary people as in that of the clergy. Understandably, this new religion was strongly resisted by both Hindu and Muslim clergy, by the rich and powerful, the likes of Malik Bhago, the Hindu kings and the Muslim Nawabs.

Now 500 years later, the Sikh message remains vibrant, universal and timeless – for all people, men and women alike. And the Guru is available for advice, and support everywhere around the world, 24 hours a day, seven days a week. One would think that Gurus’ mission has been accomplished and the people finally liberated from the stranglehold of priests. But not so fast! The Sikh clergy, and the Sikh theologians seem to have replaced the Brahmins and Qazies. They interpret Guru Granth in accordance with the outdated age-old mythology and philosophy of Hindu Shastras, Upanishads, and cockamamie stories of Puranas, which were discarded by Gurus in unequivocal terms. The allegories, metaphorical statements and mythical legends, which are used in Guru Granth only to make a point, are being promoted as the literal truth.

The Gurus directed their Sikhs to live in the present and not get bogged down in speculative theories of past and future lives. Gurus taught a life of faith, honesty and justice, imbued with grace. The Gurus emphasized truthful living to be even higher

than truth, “schu PrE sBu ko PUPir scu Ac;ru >” (isrlr;gu mhl; 1 - pMn; 62).

History tells us that when Muslims challenged Guru Nanak to answer which religion was better - Hinduism or Islam - his response was not that both were equally good, but that without good deeds both labels were meaningless. In the words of Bhai Gurdas, “puLzN gLI Xim;n dl k;JI muLI” iXkWe hoXI> vLD; s”g vrt;iXA IK n sLke kudrit koXI> puLzN KolH ikt;b nUM vLD; ihMdU ik muslm;noXI> b;b; AKe h;jla” SuB ami” b;Zo’ dove’ roXI> ihMdU muslm;n duiX drgih aMdr IEN n YoXI>” (B;XI gurd;s v;r 1 - pPuxl 33).

But now Sikh clergy has replaced the Hindu Brahmins *and Mullahs* to promote rituals rather than deeds to maintain their stranglehold. While Sikh politicians, a la the Hindu kings and Muslim Nawabs of old, promote bigotry for their own political ambitions. Once again, any questioning minds are branded as heretical troublemakers and shunted aside.

While we argue that the Gurus ensured that the message of Sikhism was available to the common person, we are also mindful of the fact that according to Bhai Gurdas, the path of Sikhism is sharper than a razor’s edge. Mark his words:

Guruiski b;rlk hE, isl cTN iFkl . itKI KMDe w;r hE, Puhu v;lhMu inkl . v;r 9, pPuxl 2;

Guruiski b;rlk hE, KMDe w;r gll ait Bixl . v;r 11, pPuxl 5

v;lhMu inkl AiKaE, KMDe w;rhu suNlaE itKI . v;r 28, pPuxl 1

In our view here he did not mean that the Sikh way is difficult to grasp or that it requires an intermediary (priest or clergyman) to interpret. What he was pointing to *is* that our lives are such that it becomes difficult to always stay on the straight and narrow path, to always remain consistent in direction and action. There are too many distractions and temptations along the journey.

Look for the same thought in gurbani. Guru Amar Das says: Bgt; kl c;l inr;ll>1> c;l; inr;ll Bgt;h kerl ibKm m;rg cIN;>2> Ibu loBu ahMk;ru tij itRsn;bhutu n;hl bolN>3> Kinahu itKI v;lhU inkl Xetu m;rig j;N;>4> gur pRs;dl ijnl Apu tijA hir v;sn; sm;NI>5> khE n;nku c;l Bgt; jughu jugu inr;ll>6> (gurU gMRq pMn; 918)

In this the Guru describes a true devotee as one who relinquishes his ego and arrogance, as well as his temporal desires of acquiring endless wealth and power. The Guru further describes the path as finer than a hair and sharper than the razor’s edge, but one that will bring eternal bliss (*Anand*) to the mind.

Is it difficult to put this directive of the Guru in practice? The answer is both “No” and “Yes”. It is “No”, because we do not need any special tools, rituals or intermediaries (clergy) to help us. “Yes,” because changing one’s lifestyle is never easy, the mind is full of inherent contradictions and, duality. We hope more wealth and power will bring increasing security and happiness. But we also want to believe in the Guru, who tells us otherwise. When we give a donation at the gurdwara, we

ask the granthi to pray for our material success in his “ardaas,” and yet the Guru tells us to look beyond money. That is why Sikhi, says the Guru, is a difficult path, a narrow road. It is like walking on a thin rope, a path sharper than a razor’s edge. The choice is ours, but the message is direct and not difficult to comprehend.

Keep in mind that the Brahmin *or Mullah* became the priest and the priests invented rituals that put them in the center of a way that no non-*clergy* could understand or be permitted to replicate. Now that is control.

Let us not blame the clergy of Hinduism or Islam exclusively. The story of the Roman Catholic Church is not much different. Until less than thirty years ago, the language of Mass was Latin only – and it is about as well understood by the average churchgoer as Sanskrit or Arabic is by the average Hindu or Muslim. A service in any language of the people was considered an illegal or Black service. Now that the Mass in vernacular is permitted, its mysteries are perhaps accessible to all.

We tend to forget that the Gurus taught their message in the language of the people. The analogies and metaphors that they used also came from the ordinary life of ordinary people. Common people do not have to go to college to understand the Gurus or their teachings. No rite in Sikhism mandates the presence of the clergy. Much of the Guru Granth that is relevant to the Sikhs in their daily lives is straightforward and clear. Sikhism is really a “Do it yourself” religion in contrast to most other religions. Sikhism or for that matter any religion is a path to follow; it is surely not a spectator sport.

The principles that the Gurus enunciated are simple and have to do with life. It is an egalitarian, gender-neutral message that looks for divinity in the ordinary heart. It empowers ordinary people by showing them how to explore divine connectivity in *sangat*. This translated into a lifestyle that *is* honest and honorable, personally enriching through a sense of social responsibility. The message was framed by an institutional code of conduct. That is how society, communities and nations are built.

When we look at this simple summary of Sikhism it is clearly one that is easily understood by the average person. It requires not years of schooling or clergy for its interpretation, but an open mind and a willing heart.

The difficulty lies not in understanding of the Sikh path but in remaining consistent in our journey along it. And that’s the meaning of a do-it-yourself religion.