

Guru Nanak: Bridge Across All Faiths

MAHEEP SINGH, Ph. D.

IN ONE OF HIS COMPOSITIONS Guru Nanak said, "As long as we are in this world, we should listen to others and say something to them". This is the basic principle of dialogue, of exchange of opinions or ideas. During his four lengthy journeys to the east, south, north and west, he opened a dialogue with all the existing faiths, not in today's empirical or utilitarian language, but in ethical and spiritual language capable of expressing human realities and spiritual values. He filled the inter-religious space with love, ethical humanism and spirituality. He approached every religion as his own and presented his own faith and philosophy as everyone's religion, in the crucible of eternal Truth.

He travelled to various centres of religious pilgrimage. His dialogue with pandits, sadhus and yogis of every sect, as with mullas, pirs and kazis continued throughout his life. He visited the places of pilgrimage of Kurukshetra, Mathura, Haridwar, Benaras, Gaya as well as those in Bengal, Assam and Sri Lanka. He visited the sufi establishments at Pak Pattan and Multan and shrine sites along the west coast of India. He travelled beyond India in the west to Mecca, Medina and Baghdad. There are accounts of still farther travels to the east to Tibet and China. He reached mount Sumer and had a long dialogue with siddhas (hermits). He recorded his discourse with siddhas in his famous composition *Siddha Gosht* (Dialogue with siddhas).

Guru Nanak won over all by the power of loving devotion. He was not a sectarian reformer attached to one community of faith or part of the world. He was a preacher of the divine Reality, transcending all particularities of race or clan.

In his encounter with yogis, siddhas, vedantists, vaishnavas, shaivas, Buddhists, Jains, different sects of Muslims, Guru Nanak told them that religion is without its moorings till it joins the main life-current of humanity and socially and spiritually insinuates itself into them. While Guru Nanak changed old beliefs into new one by the infusion of values, he projected his perennial wisdom into the stream of consciousness of other faiths by telling them how they could become true Muslims, good Hindus or enlightened yogis. Every religion at its ethical and spiritual best mingled with the religion of Guru Nanak and Guru Nanak's religion appealed to the people of every faith as their own at its best.

Guru Nanak does not ask man to deny the temporal existence but urges him not to succumb to the fascination of the visible and the exterior, but to turn towards the inner light and music that man has received from God, and move towards a more and more complete interiority which leads him to the vision of Reality. Man has to breathe and live in two worlds simultaneously - the temporal and the spiritual.

In Guru Nanak's time, Indian society was caste-ridden and had divided itself into countless watertight compartments. Men were considered high and low on account of their birth and not according to their deeds. Equality of human beings was a dream. As the caste system was not based on divine love for all, Guru Nanak condemned it. He aimed at creating a classless and casteless society in which all were equal and where one member did not exploit the other.

By his magnetic personality, Guru Nanak had fascinated millions of people in his own lifetime. He was adored by Hindus as well as by Muslims. A couplet became very popular in the Punjab -

*Nanak Shah fakir
Hindu ka guru, Musalman ka pir*

The impact of Guru Nanak has been described by Bhai Gurdas, poet and near contemporary, in a picturesque stanza -

*As Guru Nanak made his appearance in the world,
There was light everywhere,
As when the sun rises
The stars vanish and darkness retreats.
Wheresoever the Guru set his foot,
That spot became sanctified.
Spots once sacred to the Siddhas
Do celebrate Nanak now,
Every home is turned into a dharamsala
And every day into a festival of praise to the Divine
By manifesting the Eternal Name
The Guru has redeemed all the four corners
And all the nine realms of the earth.*

God's own witness had appeared in the Kali age.

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Guru Nanak and Islam

PROF. ABDUL MAJID KHAN*

** The late Prof. Abdul Majid Khan who taught at Forman Christian College, Lahore, in 1940's was known for his nationalist views. He chose to cross over to Shimla, India, in 1947 and taught at a local college. This article was first published in SR in Nov. 1977.*

FROM THE EARLIEST TIMES, reformers have appeared in India, who tried to rid Hinduism of its abuses. After the advent of Islam in India, a new kind of reformer rose among the Hindus as well as among the Muslims. He was Guru Nanak. He tried to bring the two religions nearer each other by stressing the common features of both and attacking their external observances. An effort was, thus made to bring about a synthesis of the two.

He rose against caste and ignored it altogether. His life long disciple was a Muslim, Mardana by name. He was, in a way, neither Hindu nor Muslim, for he was both and his followers came from both religions and from all castes. He was most powerful exponent of devotional faith, centered in an impersonal, transcendental God. Love of God and man was his religion.

Great Reformer: People flocked around Guru Nanak. He was one of those great reformers who tried to find a common platform for Hinduism and Islam. His nine successors nourished his faith and the last of them, Guru Gobind Singh, transformed Sikhism into a military mission to resist political oppression and tyranny.

Guru Nanak was aware that Islam stands for the creation of a classless society by eliminating all possible social conflicts and ending all clashes and resolving disputes peacefully. It insists on class collaboration. In the sphere of economics, Islam lays down that it is not in the interest of humanity if wealth continues to circulate among the wealthy only, and it thus visualizes through its laws and institutions, a 'Cooperative Commonwealth of Talents'. In the domain of politics, Islam is for the right type of socialism. The Islamic State should be a welfare state, a socialistic state, where no human being has a right to govern other human beings in an arbitrary and despotic manner.

The beginning of the 16th century was the era of religious reform and what Luther did in Europe, Nanak did in India. Guru Nanak was an ideal Unitarian. He fervently believed in One Absolute God. 'The *Dharma* of all men is one *Dharma*, if one understand the secret. One God is the God of all gods. From that God is the soul. If one understands the secret of the Indweller of the souls, one becomes a bright god. Nanak is his servant'.

Nanak, Prophet of Peace and Unity: Guru Nanak was pre-eminently the Prophet of peace and unity. His efforts for creating an atmosphere for world reconciliation and amity were much in advance of the age in which he lived. For all the religions of the world, he visualized a fellowship of faiths. He was of the considered view that the unity of religions was something unreal until human beings believed in monotheism and regarded God as the sole fountainhead, the eternal spring of all life and light, glory and grace. If God is One, all souls are from Him and of the same essence. How could the ways to realize Him, be different for different souls? The natural corollary to monotheism is oneness of humanity. Guru Nanak rightly remarked, 'the true preceptor is one who uniteth all'. In Guru's words, 'There is one Father and we are all His children'. Well, the Prophet Mohammad says in a similar strain, 'No other than but one community, all human beings whosoever are, indeed'. Again, all mankind is the family of God, and he is the most beloved of God, who does the greatest good to His children'.

The Tenth Guru in succession to Guru Nanak observed, 'The *Puja* and *Namaz* are the same; a Muslim mosque and a Hindu temple are both houses of God, know ye all humanity belongs to one caste'.

Idolatry Denounced: No wonder, Baba Nanak, denounced idolatry and ritualism. This was something truly Islamic. Guru Nanak was at once a liberating and a renewing force. He freed his followers from caste restrictions, for he knew that caste had all along been the bane of India.

Prayer is just a form when our mouths are uttering the words, but our soul is wandering elsewhere. Charity practised for vanity and show is only a form that can hardly do anybody any good. Guru Nanak truly said:

Religion consisteth not in patched coat, not in a *yogi's* staff, neither in ashe smeared over the body.

Religion consisteth not in earrings worn, or in a shaven head or in the blowing of horns.

Abide in God amid the temptations of this world; thus, shalt thou find the way to religion.

Similarity between Guru Nanak & Prophet Mohammed: Indeed, there is striking similarity in the Islamic-Sikh conception of God as well as in the view of Mohammad and those of Nanak, regarding the oneness of mankind, as per instance, the Fatherhood of God and the Brotherhood of Mankind. Islam and Sikhism emphatically declare that God is omnipresent and pervades the universe. Both the creeds accept the transcendental and immanent aspects of the Divinity. While Sikhism names God as '*Satnam*', the True Name, the *Qur'an* calls God '*Allehal-a-Haq*' that is to say, 'God is the Truth.' Guru Nanak as well as his successors described God by names familiar to Muslims: as *Karim*, *Rahim*, *Rab* and *Razak*. In both religions there is striking similarity in the mode of congregational prayer. The ablution preceding, the reverential attitude in standing, the bowing down, the kneeling with the forehead touching the floor and the sitting posture is wellknown throughout India.

It is, however, significant to note that whereas the Sikh congregations are open to women, who are allowed to join freely in all religious observances along with men, in Islam women are not admitted in public for prayer – they perform the devotions at home and, if they visit a mosque, they must do so when men are not there.

Guru and Five Virtues: Guru Nanak praised the Muslim habits of regular prayer very much, but he was of the opinion that the Muslims would do well to grasp the purpose of their prayer. This could only happen when they would cultivate the virtues associated with them. He says:

Panj nimizan panj vaqt – Muslims offer five prayers to God daily. And five are the names that have been given to them. The first means, Truth; the second, honest livelihood; the third, good wishes for all the people of God; the fourth, mental sincerity, or clear conscience; and the fifth, appreciation of God praise, says Nanak.

Prayer is an established institution of all religions. In Islam it is not the mere observance of the form, but the keeping of the pledge, that is to say, being true to the spirit of the prayer. The object of prayer is the purification of the heart. The Quranic words are, 'There is no piety in turning your face towards the East or West, but he is pious who (truly) believeth in God'. And "woe to those who pray, but in their prayer are careless; who make a show of devotion, but refuse to help the needy."

Importance of Service: Besides, purification of the heart, prayer must stress the need of service to humanity. The Prophet Mohammad says, 'God truly loves those who do good to others.' This is admittedly the core of Guru Nanak's message.

While the ideal of service is stressed in almost all the living religions of the world, it has a special significance for the Sikhs. To quote I.B. Banerjee: 'In spite of the fact that the ideal of service and the inculcation of spirit of brotherhood were equally significant features of almost all the schools of religious revival in contemporary India, it was in Sikhism alone that a sense of corporate unity gradually evolved.'

Persian and Arabic Influence: Some of Guru Nanak's hymns clearly show the impact of the Persian and Arabic languages:

Khudai, *bande*, *khak*, *darvesh*, *dara*, are either Persian words, or derivatives from Persian words: while *khial*, *dunia*, *fakir*, *din*, *musafar*, *Haq*, *Halal* and *arsh* are Arabic terms.

It is common knowledge that the walls of mosque as well as those of a *gurdwara* are decorated not with the images, but with floral designs and religious hymns, in the inscriptional art.

Guru Nanak's attitude to the Prophet Mohammad was one of love and respect. In a verse which is given in the *Janam Sakhi* by Bhai Bala, Guru Nanak is believed to have remarked, '*dithe Nur Mohammadi, dithat Nabi Rasool, Nanak qudrat dekh ke, khudi sab bhul*'. 'I have seen the light of Mohammad, with my mind's eye', after contemplating the glory of God, my ego was completely eliminated'.

Sikh-Muslim Accord: The fifth Master in succession to Guru Nanak, Guru Arjun had a tremendous regard for Mian Mir Sahib, a celebrated Muslim mystic, who laid the foundation-stone of the Golden Temple, the Ka'aba of the Sikh faith. And it is a common knowledge that the *Guru Granth Sahib*, compiled by the fifth Guru, is a synthesis of scriptures.

It was in the same light that Guru Gobind Singh said, in his *Bachitar Natak*, that the Prophet Mohammad was a divine messenger and a great man of religion and faith.

One of the greatest Muslim divines of the 19th century, in his famous book, *Sat Bachan*, has observed that 'Guru Nanak was a Treasure House of Divine knowledge and the knower of all mysteries'.

Perfect Human Being: Dr Iqbal in one of his immortal verses has expressed the view that Guru Nanak was a perfect human being and he awakened India from a dormant, dreamy condition to the realization of God.

Some Muslims believe that Guru Nanak's *Japuji* is a commentary on the Qur'an. Well, if that is so, it is in a way, a unique commentary. Guru Nanak's word is a voice direct from Nature's own heart. He explained truths that would make souls joyous and free. And he wanted to establish social justice on the basis of general welfare and worldwide fraternity.

In brief, Guru Nanak combined the excellencies of the preceding saints and sages and had very clear, emphatic and advanced views on social amelioration and spiritual uplift. He was steeped in the *sufi* lore and was one of the greatest religious reformers the world has ever produced. Again and again, he remarked, 'I'm neither a Hindu nor a Muslim and I do not belong to any of the four castes'.

Sikh-Muslim Affinity: Islam and Sikhism are essentially monotheistic. Both reject idol worship and insist on a life of purity and faith and have a democratic approach to human problems. Both Prophet Mohammad and Guru Nanak were keen to make their followers immune from meaningless observances, rites and rituals. They fought against humbug, hypocrisy, bigotry and fanaticism. Both advocated a sort of middle path, between extreme asceticism and greed for worldly delights, they both stressed purity of heart combined with the fulfilment of the necessary function of body, mind and soul. Both believed in practising humility of the right type and in renouncing racial, religious or regional pride. Both combined piety with practical living.

To bring about real harmony and amity among the people and to ensure their progress in every walk of life, it behoves us all to emphasize increasingly the points of similarity in different creeds, for it is wrong and improper to magnify trivialities into

principles. Obviously our differences and disputes centre on non-essentials. Sensible folk, in the final analysis, all have one and the same religion. Why attach undue or excessive importance to labels? The essence of all religions, of Islam as well as of Sikhism, is, good thought and good action, based on the all-embracing love of humanity.

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