

# Reverence for Life in the Sikh Theology

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## PART I

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SIKHISM, ARGUABLY THE YOUNGEST of the major world religions, was initiated by Guru Nanak and is based on his revelatory experiences. He is also known to have reflected deeply on the existing theologies and contemporary socio-political situation. He articulated all the original concepts and doctrines of the faith, and the nine succeeding Gurus elaborated and explained them in their hymns and other utterances. They not only consolidated and expanded the socio-religious institutions he had initiated but also set up some new ones to put their precepts into practice. The followers of the Faith, the Sikhs, are the disciples of Ten Gurus, Guru Nanak Dev (1469-1539) to Guru Gobind Singh (1666-1708), and thereafter their scripture, the Guru Granth Sahib, or more precisely the Word as enshrined therein. The Sikh tradition believes the Gurus to have become incarnate in the Word, the Word as enshrined in their Scripture. The scripture was compiled in AD 1604 and canonised in AD 1708, and there has, ever since, been no addition or alteration in its contents. However, its contents have been interpreted and re-interpreted all through these years to relate them to contemporary issues facing man.

### Premordial Truth:

Unlike some other religious traditions prevalent in the period from 15th to 17th Century, Sikhism advocates allround development of man - from within (spiritual) as well as from without (socioeconomic, moral and ethical). This is evident from Guru Nanak's axiomatic saying: Truth, no doubt, is the highest virtue, but higher still is Truthful living (SGGS, I, 62). Realization of Truth is a noble ideal on the spiritual side of life, but truthful living, which includes the behavioural patterns of man in his social intercourse, is declared nobler on the ethical side. There are several hymns in the scripture which exhort man to eulogize the Lord in his mind and perform truthful, noble deeds in his social intercourse. **The best religion, according to the Sikh scripture, is one which makes man remember God as well as perform noble deeds, says a hymn in the scripture** (SGGS, V, 266). There is another hymn in the scripture which makes an emphatic statement that man ought to work with his own hands (to make his livelihood) and at the same time concentrate his mind on the name of the Lord (SGGS: 1375). This clearly brings out the Sikh emphasis on embedding human spiritual life in society because that is the only way of raising the moral and ethical standards of humanity.

### Ascetism is Escapeism:

This implies Sikh emphasis on keeping close to each other the parallel streams of both esoteric and exoteric life. The idea of asceticism is rejected and man is advised to endeavour and attain his spiritual objective while still living a life of familial and social obligations: man must live in the world but must not become of the world. "Man should remain ever *udasi* (detached) while leading a householder's life, just like the lotus flower remains above the muddy water from which it gets its sustenance," says a hymn (SGGS, IV, 1070). Talking about the kind of life, man should live in this world, Guru Nanak says:

“Make thy body the field, good actions the seed, and then irrigate it with the water of the Name of God who wields the entire earth in His hands. Make thy soul the cultivator, God will germinate in thy heart and in this way thou shalt obtain the highest state of *moksa*.” (SGGS, I, 23). There are numerous hymns suggesting that man must reap the harvest of his deeds. **Thus, the dual stress on doing good, noble deeds with one’s hands and one’s mind ever concentrated on God is at the centre of the Sikh metaphysics.**

We can say that the ethics of the Sikhs may be defined in broader terms as doctrine of values in human conduct as found in the Guru Granth Sahib. However, the Scripture contains the ethical teachings intertwined with the metaphysical and religious declarations. The Gurus did so perhaps for the reason that they are found comingled in our practical life also. However, the theory of good, evil, right and wrong which comprises the ethics of the Sikhs is propounded randomly. The need for such an exposition was not much felt during the Guru-period as their physical presence more than made up for the need for a system. However, in the post-Guru period, the community has accepted the works of Bhai Gurdas, who acted as an *amanuensis* with Guru Arjun as he compiled the scripture, and whose works are known to be the first exegesis of the scriptural hymns, *rahitnamas* (a genre of writings specifying approved way of life for a Sikh), and *hukamnamas* (letters written by some of the Gurus to individuals as well as to congregations of different places) as secondary literature to form the basis of their ethical conduct.

Sikhism as a faith historically belongs to medieval times, but it addresses and suggests means to deal with most of the challenges faced by man today. As it is, the scripture is primarily a compilation of inspirational, mystic poetry and not a philosophical treatise in the modern sense of the term that might discuss each of the issues in an independently organized and coherent manner. However, it alludes to, directly or obliquely, to several of the issues faced by man even today. **Among these could be counted the issues of equality, love, altruism, peaceful co-existence, freedom of conscience, reverence for life, and so on.** There are still several situations of moral dilemma facing man today for which we may not find any direct and clear-cut answers, and we may have to rely on resolutions by implication.

### **God as the Soul of Theology:**

The Sikh scripture makes several references as to what constitutes man and also to his place among other created beings in this phenomenal world. Sikhism takes the human being as the body made of five perishable elements plus the divine particle within it. The body is subject to decay and death: it has been compared with a tenement made of straw which blends with the dust when the grass is burnt (SGGS, Ravidas, 794). Another hymn in the scripture says that the body is perishable like the paper; when the drops of water fall on it, it crumbles and is wasted away without any delay (SGGS, III, 1048). However, this body becomes alive only when God places His spirit within it. **Uniting together the five elements is fashioned the body and, within that is placed the Divine jewel: the soul is the Lord and Lord is the soul, and the Lord-God can be realized by pondering over Name, says Guru Nanak (SGGS, I, 1030).** This divine particle, or soul as we call it, which resides within the body and which is its life-force, is neither male nor female, neither celebrate nor Shaivite, neither yogi nor sannyasi, neither has it mother nor is it anybody’s son, neither prince nor pauper, neither Brahmin nor Khatri, neither ascetic nor Shaikh, neither householder nor anchorite and neither has it body nor any blood in it: it is rather called the offspring, a particle (AMs) of Lord-God (SGGS, Kabir, 871).

Thus, the human body is mortal whereas the soul within, which is also its life-force, is not subject to death. **The latter being a particle of Divine is immortal whereas the former though mortal in nature is the dwelling- place of God, a temple of God, and thus acquires a sacred character.** Similarly, Sikhism also rejects the idea of this mundane world being mere *maya* or a hindrance in man's spiritual progression, rather it is proclaimed to be the place where resides the Lord. This entire manifest world as we see it is the Lord's manifestation and God's image alone is seen in it, says a scriptural hymn. Thus, living a life of filial and worldly obligations and performing noble deeds with hands while mind is concentrated on Name Divine are recommended as viable means for realizing the ultimate objective of human life. Implicitly, the idea of asceticism/escapism as a pre-requisite to man's spiritual progress stands rejected.

### **“Kingdom Come”:**

The spiritual ideal of human life as stated in a scriptural hymn is neither *raj* (kingdom, the highest one can think of in material terms) nor *mukti* (liberation or freedom from the bondage of continuous transmigration, the highest spiritual objective in many religious traditions), but it is the the love for the lotus-feet of the Lord.

God, in Sikh metaphysical thought, is taken both as transcendent (*nirgun* or without attributes, *nirankar* or without form) and immanent (*sagun* or with attributes). It is difficult to express one's feelings of love for a formless God, and since God is immanent (*qua* Spirit) in all beings, the best way to love God is to love mankind, to love His creation. Man should imbibe feelings of love in his heart in such a way as he realizes the Divine ever closer to him, i.e. in all beings who come in contact with him in his daily social intercourse.

Guru Gobind Singh, in his *Akal Ustati*, lit. Eulogy of Divine, also states that **only those who love God through such feelings for His creation realize Him. Since God pervades all, showing feelings of love, selfless service and compassion towards others is thus the best way of loving God.** Such a loving one becomes mystically attuned to God during his lifetime (*jivan-mukta*) and becomes liberated (*mukta*) as he completes his bodily existence in this world.

### **Being Human is a Blessing:**

However, to attain this spiritual objective, **it is necessary that one should have a developed sense of consciousness and the sense of discrimination.** The Sikh scripture proclaims man supreme among the entire creation in this phenomenal world. One gets born a human only after having passed through various other births. Birth as a human is a divine blessing: it is also said to be an honour to man among all the eighty-four lakhs of species. It has also been called a rare opportunity which man has to utilize for realizing mystical oneness with God and not waste by indulging in the acquisition and enjoyment of worldly comforts.

This rare opportunity of human birth must not be wasted in meeting only the needs of the body: it is called 'giving away a jewel for a shell'. It is said to be the only opportunity to end the process of transmigration and realize the Lord. Reason for this is that among all other beings only man has been blessed with the sense of discrimination, to judge between what is good/right and what is evil/wrong. He has thus been blessed with the knowledge of his spiritual ideal as well as the need to realize this.



(End of Part I)  
[To be continued]

