

Dr. Noel Q King: The Scholar Saint

AVTAR SINGH*

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DR. NOEL Q. KING, born December 8, 1922 at Taxila (now in Pakistan), - a towering academician, scholar, historian, and a saintly person, who illuminated the academic and literary circles for almost half a century - quietly passed away on February 1, 2009 at his home in Corralitos, California.

Dr. Noel was the fifth son of Mary and William King. His 'family relations' with the Sikhs span almost two centuries. His great grandfather worked for the Khalsa Army in Punjab during the rule of Maharaja Ranjit Singh in the first part of the 19th century as a vet (veterinary doctor). His father, William King was an engineer with the Indian Postal and Telegraphs department who laid telegraph lines throughout northern India, up into Tibet. Dr. King's family stayed in India until the 1940s. The young Noel King moved with family from place to place experiencing multi-cultural living. Like his elder brothers he was sent at an early age to Bishop Cotton's school in Shimla in the foothills of the Himalayas. He grew up virtually bi-lingual in English and Hindustani.

A World War II veteran, he was commissioned into the British army as a Second Lieutenant. After qualifying as a parachutist, he was in the 56th airborne Division Development Unit analyzing enemy air drop methods, devising defenses against it and researching methods of supplying ground troops from the air. As the war in Europe drew to conclusion, he was posted to the Indian Army to Manipur and then at Chaklala aerodrome. As an army officer in India, he was also in charge of security of certain passenger trains for some time that moved from Punjab and other parts of Northern India. He told me that, he at one time, provided security to a Sikh leader Master Tara Singh while he was traveling on a train. Dr. King served in India, Burma, and Europe.

Theology as First Love:

Dr. King finished his first degree in history and then a degree in theology. He graduated First Class Honors, specializing in Early Church History. He received an M.A. degree in history from Oxford University. In 1954 he got his Ph.D. in Early Byzantine history and Patristic Theology from the University of Nottingham. Dr. King taught in several universities all over the world, including, Punjabi University Patiala, Guru Nanak Dev University, Amritsar, University of Ghana, University of Nottingham, Oxford University, Makerere University (Uganda), University of Papua/New Guinea, University of California Santa Cruz, and Senior University International. He was one of the most sought after speakers in Sikh academic conferences in India and North America.

Inter-faith Guide:

Dr. King belonged to the old school of learning in the world with a deep knowledge of Christianity, Islam, Jainism, and Sikhism, among other religions. He wrote eleven books and published articles in many other books. **He also wrote dozens of scholarly articles in various journals and encyclopedias. He was the Patron of *Sikh Review*, the oldest Sikh academic magazine in English, published from Calcutta.**

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 World Sikh Convention in Amritsar in 1995 organized by SGPC (known as the mini parliament of the Sikhs) at the Golden Temple complex. There he also received recognition from Jathedar Sri Akal Takht Sahib, the seat of Sikh spiritual and temporal authority.

He personally guided two Sikh students, Dr. Tarlochan Singh Nahal and Dr. Raghbir Singh Bains, who received doctorate degrees in Sikhism in North America. Both were honored by the Akal Takht.

Dr. King was a soft-spoken person. Scholarly terms and Latin phrases, describing deep theological concepts and unique historical events, came out of his mouth effortlessly and his demeanor and presence created a unique aura that was both uplifting and captivating. One has 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 which are often unknown to most Sikh scholars.

Humility & Generosity:

Yet he was always humble and respectful of others. He never forced his ideas on anyone. Indeed, we celebrate the life of this great teacher, scholar, and friend who held Khalsa in high esteem. He regularly donated money to Sikh Gurdwara at San Jose and other Sikh institutions. He genuinely supported academic and historical search till the very end.

Dr. King's son, Francis King is a former Diplomat in the British government who has served in various countries, including India. As such he has a deep understanding of many political and other issues around the world. Like his father, he too has a close relationship with the Sikhs in several countries. Francis told me that he was a British diplomat in New Delhi when Indira Gandhi was assassinated in 1984.

Tens of thousands of Sikhs were massacred in Delhi alone. A Sikh family lived next door to his residence. They came to Francis and told him that their life and honor was in danger and they needed his help. They wanted him and his wife to give shelter to their women folk for few days until things got calmed down. He readily agreed to their request. Thus he helped in saving the Sikh lives and honor.

A Great Loss:

Dr. King had deep veneration for Sri Guru Granth Sahib and often quoted *Gurbani*. He asked this writer to bring along a *Nitnem Gutka* (Daily Prayer book) so he could read it. He used to travel every year and visited several countries until about three years ago when his health did not allow him to travel anymore. His first preference was always to stay with a Sikh family whether it was in the US, India, Africa, Canada or some other country, because he always felt comfortable in their company. He also had friends all over the globe among all religious communities. He spoke several languages, including Punjabi, Hindi, Urdu and Latin. His first wife, Evelyn predeceased him - in April 1972 at age 49 due to brain tumor. Years later, he married Laurie, who is a well-known novelist.

Dr. King will be sorely missed by Sikhs everywhere.

