

# Sikh Spirit and the Global Society

DR. DHARAM SINGH\*

\* Deptt. of Encyclopedia of Sikhism. Guru Gobind Singh Bhavan, Punjabi University, Patiala 147001.

THE INFOTECH REVOLUTION HAS transformed the wide world into a global village. As a result, peoples of different races and creeds in distant regions are virtually next door neighbours. Different faith-communities interpenetrate and interact daily with each other. Gone are the days when people belonging to different denominations lived in their own tiny isolated camps, untroubled and ignorant of what happened outside.

**Pluralism:** In today's pluralistic global society however, there is growing unrest and disharmony. This has been due mainly to the fact that adherents of every faith are keen, indeed over-zealous, to extol their own, under-rating the ideology and culture of others. Leaders of each religion claim for their faith a monopoly over truth. To them, only their religion, only their prophet can lead man on the path to God-realization and self-realization. Other religions are declared fake and other faith-communities infidels. This exclusivist attitude is doing much damage to our social fabric, and this needs to be rectified. We must realize that "the religious life of mankind from now on, if it is to be lived at all, will be lived in a context of religious pluralism....This is true for all of us."<sup>2</sup> Therefore, the present situation should be the concern of all religions.<sup>3</sup>

The Sikh faith is the youngest of major world religions, and could be called a higher stage in the evolution of the religious consciousness of man. Originated with Guru Nanak (1469-1539) in the north-west of India, it has since spread throughout the world despite the fact that it is not a missionary faith in the evangelical sense. Its expansion, spurred during Colonial rule, continues because of the Sikh Diaspora. But dissemination of knowledge about the Sikh faith, especially in Europe and North America has helped in this expansion. One must acknowledge here the significant work done by Singh Sahib Yogi Harbhajan Singh Ji and his 3-H organization, based in New Mexico. Chronologically, the fifteenth century, when Sikh faith originated, belongs to medieval age in Indian history. **However, an in-depth study of it reveals its critical attitude towards the medieval spirit and its responsiveness to modernity.**

**Dynamics:** Sikh religion demands and provides a new definition to the concept of religion itself. For example, herein the boundaries between the realms of the sacred and the secular get blurred: in fact, there is a dynamic interaction between the two. Herein, the spiritual becomes inspirational to the temporal, and the temporal makes the spiritual a dynamic one. Thus, man and the mundane world he lives in get spiritualized: the world no more remains sinful, or *mayic*, or just suffering, rather it becomes a place where resides the Lord Himself:

*ihu jagu sachai ki hai kothari sache ka vichu vasu* <sup>4</sup>

This world is the abode of the Lord -

Verily, He the Creator-Lord, is ever immanent herein.

It is called *dharamsal* where dharma is to be lived. The world is the creation of God, and in the world one finds the becoming of God in time. Man is not a born

sinner, rather he is declared one with God, one in essence, thus giving place to the idea of spiritual unity and ethnic equality of mankind. God is one and He reveals to different holy men at different points of time. Thus, each revelation is genuine and each religion valid.<sup>5</sup> However, the feeling of *haumai*, or egoism, which is the natural consequence of *avidya*, or ignorance, makes man forgetful of his unity with God and other human beings, rather causes his differentiation from both. In the Sikh scripture, human life is declared the crown of all life - better than even that of gods who are also said to yearn for human life. It is the only opportunity for the individual soul to attempt and achieve oneness with the Supreme Soul: union with God can be realized while still living a robust and righteous life of filial and social obligations, says the Sikh scripture: *hasandia khelandia pahinandia khawandia viche hovai mukti*<sup>6</sup> Thus, the world and worldly life are declared wonderful and worth living. Doing noble deeds while still contemplating on the Name Divine is the Sikh ideal: in fact, the best of religions is the one which exhorts humans to contemplate on God while performing noble deeds in proactive social life:

*sarab dharma mahi sreshath dharma  
hari ko namu japi nirmal karamu*

**Universal:** The Sikh faith integrates the world and worldly life with the idea of divinity. It rejects asceticism, but at the same time it is also highly critical of the hedonistic way of life. Asceticism and hedonism, as two extremes, are rejected in Sikhism, and the Sikh concept of social action is marked by boundaries of morality. In Sikhism, Khalsa as created by Guru Gobind Singh in fulfillment of Guru Nanak's mission is the agency to which the task of social transformation has been endowed whereas the scripture renders the general framework of structure in which the task is to be accomplished. However, both the structure and the agency must function in harmony to bring about peaceful co-existence, love and compassion, equality and justice in society.<sup>8</sup>

As against the exclusivist attitude, Guru Nanak does not try to impose on anybody the message of his revelation, rather he shared it with all. He took out four preaching odysseys traveling throughout India and some neighbouring countries to share that message with the mankind in general and the holy men of diverse religious traditions in particular. He made it a point to visit every place of pilgrimage that fell on his way and held discourse with the holy men there. The idea was to listen to them and then convey them his own viewpoint. In one of his hymns, Guru Nanak testifies to the importance of dialogue in inter-faith and inter-community relations - *jab lag dunia rahiai Nanak kichhu suniai kichhu kahiai*<sup>9</sup>: Man must continue to maintain dialogue throughout his worldly existence because that is the only way of reaching the truth. Even here priority is given to listening to the viewpoint of the other. Dialogue is recommended, but polemic is categorically rejected:

*Khoji upjai badi binsai Hau bali bali gur kartara*<sup>10</sup>  
(Genuine search [for truth] begins when all polemic ends;  
Sacrifice am I unto the God Creator).

Polemic causes – and is also caused by – ego which, in the Sikh scripture, is referred to as a “serious malady”. On the other hand, humility which is a necessary pre-requisite for listening to the other's point of view is the essence of all virtue. Guru Nanak's “*Siddha Gosti*”, as we find it included in the Sikh scripture, is a sort of

spiritual dialogue between Guru Nanak and Siddhas on the Sikh philosophy of life vis-a-vis the philosophy of yoga. Throughout the long-drawn dialogue, the serenity and sobriety is retained and the aim is to realize the truth. Guru Nanak is of the view that it is only through meaningful dialogue that truth can be arrived at. It is also this sort of attitude which modern mind must cultivate so as to resolve most of the socio-political and inter-community problems.

Another exclusivist point negated by Sikh faith has been the denial of validity and authenticity of prophets and revelation of other traditions. This is generally done by comparing the ideal of one's own faith with the practices of others. Sikhism not only acknowledges and appreciates other faiths, it accepts their equal validity. This is like the 20<sup>th</sup> century American poet and mystic, Walt Whitman, who accepted "a hundred, a thousand other Saviours and mediators and Bibles". This attitude helps us understand and appreciate other religions and live in harmony with other faith-communities.

The compilation<sup>2</sup> of the Sikh Scripture is another concrete example of the Sikh acceptance of religious pluralism. It can undoubtedly be called the unique scripture in its emphatic statement that revelation is neither religion-specific nor region-specific nor person-specific. It holds that revelation to different prophets in different spatio-historico-cultural milieus was expressed by them in the language, idiom and metaphor that were best suited to them, and that the revelation in each case was genuine. It is in confirmation of this that Guru Arjun while compiling the Sikh scripture included in it hymns of several holy men from other traditions along with those of the Gurus. And, these holy men belong to different caste groups, different regions and different periods. And, all the hymns in the Scripture - may they be of Guru Nanak, or Kabir or Ravidas or Farid - are held in equal reverence. However, there are certain points where the Gurus do not entirely agree with them, and at such points they retain what these holy men have to say but add to them their own comments so as to make their viewpoint clear.

The Sikh Gurus' acceptance and appreciation of other faiths was equally reciprocated by their followers. For example, Guru Nanak was held in equal reverence by Hindus as well as by Muslims. The fact of Guru Arjun gathering both Hindus as well as Muslims around him is acknowledged by Emperor Jahangir himself. It was on Guru Arjun's invitation that Mian Mir, a known Muslim Sufi, laid the foundation stone of the Harimandar Sahib, the sanctum sanctorum of the Sikhs. Guru Tegh Bahadur gave away his life for the sake of religious freedom of man. Among the Sikhs, Bhai Kanhaiya is the best example of a Sikh seeing the same divine essence behind different religious denominations of wounded soldiers in the battle-field of Anandpur. Treating all human beings as spiritually one, and ethnically equal, notwithstanding their different religious backgrounds is the pre-requisite for maintaining harmonious relationship between different faith communities.

The Sikh faith, no doubt, accepts plurality but this acceptance is not passive, rather it is critical. This critical spirit is quite explicit on at least two very vital points. **One**, the Sikh Gurus are highly critical of any religion which sanctions and safeguards hierarchical structure of mankind. The idea of inequality by birth among people is not acceptable to them. There are many hymns in the Sikh scripture which criticize the spirit and philosophy of the Vedic tradition which classifies humans into different *varnas* or castes. In Sikh theology, all humans are equal notwithstanding all

the differences in their exterior: all humans are, in essence, one with God and equal among themselves as well as in His eye.

**Two**, the Sikh faith condemns the religion that mobilizes mass support in the name of religion to serve the interests of the contemporary ruling political class. The Sikh Gurus are against religion becoming an instrument of political dominance. Therefore, they criticize any religion that serves an oppressive purpose, especially at the hands of political classes. Thus, religion no more remains an asylum for the voiceless and the helpless, rather it is made a weapon in the hands of the suffering people against the unjust oppressor.

**Emansipatory “Panth”**: Khalsa (the constituents of the Khalsa Panth) is the agency to carry out the work of social transformation, and the Khalsa-Panth (as a collective social entity) as created by Guru Gobind Singh on the Vaisakhi day (30 March) of AD 1699 represents, in micro-cosmic form, the Sikh ideal of social structure. It is a classless and casteless social structure wherein love is the abiding value which gets “reflected in the altruistic tendencies of the Khalsa. Everybody here suffers in the suffering of everybody else. This suffering is not in the sense of pain from evil as evil, but **it is in bearing the pain of others to relieve them of pain as also of evil**. This altruistic tendency finds expression in the deeds of *seva* (service) to others, contributing in cash and kind for philanthropic purposes, striving for and even suffering martyrdom for a righteous cause, etc. As S. Radhakrishnan says the creation of Khalsa was to ‘defy religious intolerance, religious persecution and political inequality.’ **Cultivation of the values of the Khalsa by all humans is an answer to many maladies of modern life.**

If we want the world to be set free from the prevalent distrust and disharmony, oppression and violence, ‘we have to see others as our brothers and sisters. we need to discover how to affirm our own identity ... without threatening the identity of others.’<sup>13</sup> This happens to be the central message of Sikh faith which says that the idea of God’s love for all beings teaches us to value the other in his or her otherness. It considers all religions and their revelations valid, appreciates others’ faiths but, at the same time, adopts dialogue to convey its differences on whatever points, makes love for God the *vis-a-tergo* for love for mankind and express this love through *seva* and such other philanthropic activities. Sikh stress is on ethics of creative activism aiming at the realization of an ideal social structure of the Gurus’ vision. The need of the hour is that we must not limit ourselves to words alone but try to put them into practice, to live the idea in our practical social life.

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## References

1. For an understanding of exclusivism and inclusivism and pluralism, see Alan Race, *Christians and Religious Pluralism* (London:SCM),1983.
2. Wilfred Cantwell Smith, *The Faith of Other Men* (New York: Harper and Row, 1962) 11
3. Paul Knitter, *One Earth, Many Religions* (New York: Orbis, 1995), 21
- 4 & 5. Guru Granth Sahib, II, 463
- 6 & 7. *ibid.*, I, 522 & 266.
8. N. Muthumohan, *Essential Postulates of Sikhism* (Patiala: Punjabi University, 2003), 128
10. Guru Granth Sahib, I, 661
11. *ibid.*, II, 1255

12. The work on the compilation of the Sikh scripture was completed in 1604- the same year when work began on the Authorized or King James Version of the Bible.
13. Marcus Braybrooke ,” Sikhism: A Religion for the Third Millennium” in *Perspectives on Sikhism* (Patiala: Punjabi University,2001), 15

