

Sikhism-the Religion of the Sikhs

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Abstract: B (2). *The hymns (inspiring devotional songs) were prepared in 1430 large size printed pages which was initially prepared by the prophet preceptor in 1604 at Amritsar. In it Dr. S. Radhakrishnan says -“We find a wide range of mystical emotion, intimate expressions of the personal realisations of God and rapturous hymns of divine love” 1. It was Guru Gobind Singh who initiated in Sikhism the custom of carrying the following five as the distinguishing mark of every Sikh (i) Kesh (Long cut hair), Kangha (a comb), Kara (Iron Bracelet), Kirpan (Sword) and kuchch (shorts), the five K’s as they are called. We can call it the dress code of the Sikhs which no other religion of the world prescribes.*

Keywords: Sikhism, Holy Granth, S. Radhakrishnan, Guru Nanak Deb, Guru Arjun Deb, Guru Gobind Singh, Sikh Mission, Herbert Stroup, World, Man, After Life, Evil and Suffering, God, Prayer & ultimate reality, Amritsar

1. Introduction

A (1). Amongst all the major religions of the world, Hinduism is the oldest and Sikhism is the youngest. The basic sacred book in Sikhism is the Adigranth compiled in 1603-4AD by the Sikh Guru Arjun Deb which is kept at a Desk in all Gurudwaras. It is written in Gurumukhi language which is not readable by all. Guru Nanak is regarded to be the founder of Sikh religion. Besides him Guru Arjun Deb played epoch making roles in shaping Sikhism in its present form. With the death of Guru Gobind Singh (1708) the line of the personal Guru in Sikhism terminates and this was already foretold by Guru Gobind Singh.

Sacred Writings

The Holy Granth contains the sacred writings of the Sikh Gurus and is thus the repository of their sacred word and holy utterances. What is more, the blessed founder of their faith Guru Nanak Deb (1469-1539AD) has stated that those word and utterances to be the “Lords/own word,” “Word of the supreme being”. As the word of the master comes to me, so I make it known” 2. O Lalo!

A remarkable feature of the Adigranth is that it contains the writings of all the religious teachers of Hinduism, Islam, exhibiting there by “respect for all religions, belief in the freedom of human spirit, virtue of toleration” and noble quality of appreciation of whatever was available in other religious traditions” 3.

As in the Upanishads, Guru Nanak assumes that Brahman is one (Ekambar). The whole universe is pervaded by him. He is immanent and transcendent to contain a new word he can be described as trans immanence. In fact Brahman is in everything and everything and everything is Brahman.

Before we go forward to explain Sikhism as a religion it is necessary to know about the definition of a Sikh. The word Sikh derives from the Sanskrit word ‘shishya’ which is translated as disciple in English. Let us say that a Sikh is a disciple of the Guru and tries to discipline his lower self into the higher. He is admitted in the community after a specific initiation ceremony. His baptism (the sacrament of Amrit taking) enjoins upon the maintenance of five kalkars: (mentioned earlier). Besides this he is supposed to avoid telling a lie, taking any intoxicant and having union with any other woman than his wife. He should neither remove hair

from any part of his body, nor take meat prepared in another way than the Sikh, non smoke. These do’s and don’ts are devised to discipline his ego and prepare him for emotional, moral and spiritual consummation. Thus, we find that a Sikh has to go through rigorous discipline.

Basic features of Sikhism as a religion

Sikhism makes an attempt to reconcile Hinduism with Islam, for the most part it is a reaction against both. Consequently, it has developed some faiths and practices which are distinctively its own and which therefore, give it a distinctive character as a separate religion. Before me embark upon the Sikh Mission and its philosophical importance it would not be out of place to mention some of its basic features.

- 1) Sikhism is strictly a monotheistic religion. The oneness of God is emphasized by all of them in one voice.
- 2) The one and only one supreme God is regarded as Creator, Sustainer and Destroyer. Reference to Bramha, Vishnu are there in Sikhism but these are regarded as creations of God himself and they have got no independent status of their own. He is both immanent and transcendent.
- 3) Like Hinduism, Sikhism has a firm belief in Karma and transmigration. ‘As one sows, so he reaps’. Those who perform bad actions under the spell of the evil passions have to undergo a fresh birth after the end of the present life while those who perform good actions are engaged in sincere devotion to God become free from the chain of birth, death and birth and attain salvation.
- 4) Amongst other things, performance of righteous actions, Nama Simran (Repeating the name of God) Bhajan and Kirtan (corporate singing of the praise of God etc are taken as a means of liberation and it is not possible without God’s grace and the helping hand of a Guru.

Sikh Mission

Guru Nanak was a missionary in the truest sense. His whole life was a life of message. He travelled over a greater part of land that any prophet has ever done in the world. He travelled nearly the whole of Southern Asia; and wherever he went he left behind to carry on his work and deliver his message of salvation even to those who had not personally heard him. In the Punjab several converts took up his mission. Bhai Lallo was preaching in the North; Sajjan in the South-West; Gopal Das in Banaras; Bushair Ghada

Baste; Budhan Shah in Kartarpur; Mahi in Mahesar; in Jagganath Kalyug the priests son; in Lushai (Tebet) Deblut; in Bihar and Patna, Salis Rai; in Ceylon Raja Shiva Nabh and a host of other workers were scattered in his mission. In Junagadh, Cuttack Bedar, Johar (sbabhtud) Nanak Mato (Kamaon Hills), Kathmandu, Persian Gulf, Kabul, Jalalabad and other places 4.

The Sikh Religion

Before we proceed further we must know what religion is. The etymology of the word religion indicates that religion is there to bind man together in one thread of brotherhood, but the actual experience has been something different. It is more divided than bound. The following lines of Vivekananda echo as fresh even today as when they were written - "Nothing has made the brotherhood of man more tangible than religion; nothing has made man more bitter enemy between man and man than religion. Nothing has build more charitable institutions, more hospitals for man and even for animals, than religion; nothing has deluged the world, with more blood than religion" 5. It is Braithwaite, 6 who while analysing the nature of religious language has drawn our attention very significantly towards the aspect of the religions of the world. According to his analysis, every religion consists of two things (i) a moral way of life and (ii) certain stories. The first is primary and the second is only subsidiary, but the two are there in every religion. However, it is a fact that there is a philosophical dispute over the definition of religion. Some have said it is a way of life". Edward B. Tylor in his essay in 'Primitive Culture' has defined it as 'a belief in spiritual beings'. According to James George Frazer 'it is a propitiation or conciliation of powers superior to man which are believed to direct and control the course of nature and of human life'. (James George Frazer, The golden bough) 7. He further says that "it is a belief in impersonal, supernatural forces and attempts to appease them". "Further, the first person to define religion is that it is a unified system of beliefs and practices related to sacred things set apart and forbidden beliefs and practices which unite into a single moral community called a church, all those who where to them.

However, the most worthwhile definition in the modern context is of Galloway who says, "It is man's faith in a power beyond himself whereby he seeks to satisfy (himself) his emotional aspects/needs and gain stability of life" 8. That means religion is based on two things - (i) Power of faith and (ii) Power beyond himself and that is a of a higher thing which obviously in terms of philosophical aspect is God and nothing else. According to him only that religion can be taken as universal which touches the inner soul of man and which goes beyond all distinctions of class or group such that the ways of deliverance pointed out by it are applicable to all and not only a few particular class or group. The definition of religion is a controversial and complicated subject in religious studies with scholar's failing to agree on any one definition. It is also believed that it is a belief in a God or Gods and the activities with us.

God

Like all other theistic religions, Sikhism takes God as

omnipotent, omniscient, omnipresent etc, but sometimes very much emphasis as the omnipotence of God in the vein of Islam. As omnipotent, God's will is taken as sovereign. "Thou art absolute and whatever is in Thy will come to pass".

"Again, whatever pleases Thee, that Thou doest' and none can gainstay it" 9. Sometimes God is also addressed as Master. "Wondrous, my master are Thy ways". Besides, God has been described as father, mother, friend, brother, enlightener, protector, shelter of the shelter less, helper of the poor, etc. He is kind, benevolent, loving etc. He is really the ocean of all virtues, Sikhism, however, does not believe in incarnation. And here it is nearer to Islam than to Hinduism.

So, we find that Sikhism is strongly monotheistic. "In this respect it is much more in agreement with Islam than with Hinduism. Islam taught that God is one and for extends any and all deities advocated by all other religions. Sikhism follows Islam faithfully on this score. It is true that monotheistic teachings are found within Hinduism. The Upanishads, for example, impatient with the Vedic pantheon, actively advocate Bramha as the God above all Gods. But Hinduism, not only in the Vedic period but later, has been amenable to other teachings about God. Nanak's time it was largely characterised by polytheism; it is against this expression of Hinduism that Nanak revolted, and on this basis he rejected the authority of he Vedas. He could not agree that there are many Gods and that the individual or the group should have the privilege of selecting the one or ones that particularly suit his fancy" 10. Nanak and later Sikhism emphasized the importance of the singleness of God and of this reality beside every other imagined deity.

"Nanak was never tired of preaching the glory and the greatness of God. He thought that the True Name is self-created and self-existent, that he pervades everything in the whole creation and is responsible for the conduct of greatest and smallest affairs. Nobody knows the limits of God; only God himself knows how great He is. All descriptions and the greatness of God all praise of him fall short of his reality. The power of the True Name was most apparent to Nanak, who believed that this can force the believer from the control of Karma and the necessity for rebirth" 11. All men are inscribed in his name and moral presence. He does not belong to any partial people, whether Hindu or Muslim, but is the universal dispenser of life. Thus God is one, absolute, eternal, transcendent, immanent, omnipresent and real.

The opening hymn of Adi Granth which is known as the Mula Mantra of Sikhism is as follows -

"I Onkar Satnam Karta purukh nirabhav ni ravir akal murat of uni saibhang gur parisad". "

The mantra may be paraphrased as follows. "This being is one. He is eternal. He is immanent in all things. He is the creator of all things. He is immanent in his creation. He is without fear and without enmity. This being is not subject to time. He is beyond birth and death. He is himself responsible for his own manifestation. He is known by the grace of the Guru". At one place Nanak says in this regard, "The Lord is

manifest in the three worlds. He refers to Brahma, Vishnu and Shiva, but he seems to take them simply as God's creatures. They have got no independent status. God is himself the creator, the sustainer and the destroyer. He is the one, is himself Brahma, Vishnu and Shiva and He himself performs all" 12.

These ideas as found in Sikhism have an echo of the poet Tagore's ideas about the nature of the world.

There seems to be a striking similarity between Hinduism and Christianity in point of taking God as three in one or as per one in three (Trinity) In Hinduism, the trinity is formed by Brahma, Vishnu and Mahesh and in Christianity it is formed by God the Father, God the son and the Holy spirit.

But we can well mark that there is a difference in the nature of the trinity. In the Hindu trinity, Brahma represents the creative aspect, Vishnu the maintaining and sustaining aspects Mahesh (or Shiva), the destructive aspect of supreme God, but in Christianity there is no such functional distinctive in the nature of God head.

The World

The World according to Sikh religion, is the creation of God. He has neither created the world as ex nihilo nor out of material lying beside him. The entire world is the product of the Divine will or divine order (Hukum). By Thy "Hukum Thy didst create all forms".

Creation, however is a continuing process according to Sikhism. It is not that God creates the world once for all and sits apart from it. God is continuously working in this world, and the act of creating perpetually goes on change and newness are therefore, taken as perfectly real.

Moreover, God's act of continual creation shows the perpetual interest in it. The world, therefore is not a place of hatred and defiance according to Sikhism. It is rather like a God's Garden where man finds an opportunity to act righteously. The World is a place worth living and one should not hate it. It is God's creation and God continually nurtures it in a benevolent manner. The above gives us a clear idea of the fact that the world, according to Sikhism, is perfectly real. "True is He, truth is He, true is His creation" 13. Because God is real and the world is God's manifestations, therefore, the world is perfectly real. However, sometimes the world is regarded as maya by the Sikh Gurus. But this is not true as Maya denotes here nothing more than the phenomenon of constant change. It does not say that the world is unreal, but simply that the world is constantly changing.

Creation, according to Sikhism has a definite purpose. The world is not moving blindly. But the purpose is not revealed to man. It will be revealed to him only when his ego (Haumai) and attain his real nature. However, creation having a purpose does not imply that by creation the world God has any need to fulfil. God is all perfect and has no need of his own.

Man

Man in his true nature is given a very high position in Sikhism. He is rather the highest being in creation. Life and consciousness are found in various degrees in the various living beings of the world, but they are found in the most developed form in man. "Man is blessed with the light of reason and discrimination" 14. Outwardly, man seems simply to be a body, but in his inner essence he has a mana (manas or atman) The man or atman is the divine element in him. It is just like a bubble in the ocean of divine consciousness. The separate selves are all the separate bubbles in the same ocean. In accordance with the different surroundings the different selves development develop different natures but at bottom they are all one.

The above is the true nature of man. But man as he stands in this world is his present state is in a degenerate condition, separated from its original divine source through the veil of delusion pride, egoism etc which are briefly included under what is called Haumai in Sikhism. The pure atman has become impure by the attachment of five evil passions Kama (lust), Krodh (Anger) Lobha (consciousness), Moha (attachment) to the worldly objects and A hankara (pride). Due to these evils, man has become degenerated and lost his true nature. Being attached to these, he performs 'Karmas' and consequently falls in bandage, i.e. in the chain of birth, death and rebirth. Thus man's present state is the state of his imperfection or degeneration. This is mainly due to egoism or selfishness. One who obeys the Guru and acts under his guidance, is released from the present state of imperfection. Thus, transcendence of the present position is possible. Man has got the capacity of self-transcendence. He can go beyond his degenerate position. Man's separation from God shows that he is free and he can use his freedom to impose his present state.

Herbert Stroup has beautifully summed up the following in his book 'Four religions of Asia' as under - "Sikhism teaches that man may find salvation by knowing God or by being ultimately absorbed into God. The doctrine is appropriate to the emphasis in Sikhism upon the wholly-otherwise of deity. Man is helpless; God is all-powerful. Salvation is not fundamentally achieved by any action open to the believer. He can think upon and repeat the name of God endlessly. He can go on pilgrimages, worship in shrines, and use all kinds of religious practices, but these alone will not suffice. Sikhism teaches that man's salvation depends upon the grace of God" 15. Further, "Sikhism requires that every believer is a disciple (Siksha) of a Guru. The believer must surrender himself usually totally to the Guru - a sign of his total submissiveness to the True Name. The Guru has the responsibility of instructing the believer in the true faith by which the grace of God may become operative for him. Similarly, in the moral life Sikhism lays stress not on rules or laws, but upon discipleship. The Guru is a model for the disciple in his daily conduct. The goal of the disciple is to achieve that higher quality of life which is exemplified in living Gurus, and more particularly those virtues which were taught and lived by the first ten Gurus in Sikhism's history" 16.

Another formulation of the Sikh code of conduct lists three

general injunctions. First, the Sikh should always speak the truth and never tell lies. He should beware of even an unconscious sin. Third, he should not “step on the bed of another’s wife even in a dream. However, these are in its practical outlook appears to be a mere cry nay impossible.

Evil and Suffering

The problem of suffering is dealt with in Sikhism in the characteristic Hindu way. Suffering is all due to ignorance. Attachment to the world is an illusion and it is that which is the cause of all suffering. Under the spell of ignorance, we are attached with the various passions and cling to worldly objects. Attached Karmas and rebirth are the real symbols of suffering. All human suffering is due to egoism or self-centeredness (Hamai). The moment it is given up, suffering ends.

However, there is a trend in suffering to understand evil as a gift of God in order to correct human beings. It is said that ignorance is given to men by God. It is he who has created people and therefore ultimately it is he who is responsible for dragging people in ignorance. Here, Sikhism seems to concede evil as a gift of God. “Many are endlessly afflicted by pain and hunger but even these, Beneficent one are Thy gifts” 17. The gift is meant for correcting people. Due to suffering man develops fear and consequently abandons sin and attains a higher moral life. Thus, the function of evil is corrective.

Life after Death

Sikhism’s teaching on the afterlife has much more in common with Hinduism, with its emphasis on Karma and rebirth, than with Islam which teaches a belief in judgement, paradise, and hell. According to Islam, Allah one day will judge his creatures. On the doom’s day, rewards and punishments will be distributed. Unbelievers will go to hell, a place where they will broil in encompassing sheets of fire. The righteous, however, will enter paradise, a place filled with tempting food, agreeable rest, flowing rivers, and sensuous pleasures. But “Sikhism rejected this view of the afterlife. It does not teach a decisive judgement nor a joyous paradise. The human being, according to Sikhism, is bound by Karma and rebirth. He can escape these only by being absorbed into God. This absorption corrects mystical union and comes about by the grace of God and the faithful repetition of the True Name” 18. The mana or atman of man is immortal and after the death of the body it assumes another fresh body in accordance with its past Karma. Although it is not mentioned in Sikhism as to what sort of Karma corresponds to what sort of birth, but this is clear that birth in various forms is a sequel to the variety of corresponding Karmas. “Karma determines the nature of our birth”. “O my Lord who can comprehend Thy excellence? None can account my sinfulness. Many times was I born a tree, many times as an animal and many times I flew as a bird” 19. But this idea seems to be remote now because with the development of man in the present day man can take birth in the form of man only, may be with some deformities some blind, lame etc according to his Karmas but we can’t say with full authority that he will be born in lower animals.

However, rebirth in some form or other is a sequel only to bad and immoral actions. If one performs righteous actions in his life, he is released from the cycle of birth and death by having a reunion with God. In God’s presence, Dharmaraj scrutinising of record of good and evil and in accordance with our deeds we dwell near than far off 20. Living far off means going to the chains of rebirth and dwelling near God signifies release. Sometimes references to hell and the city of Yama are also found in Sikhism. “He, who forgets the Name must endure suffering. When the divine order bids him depart, how can he remain? He is submerged in the well of Hell as a fish without water” 21. “A man who is without the name collapses like a wall of sand. How can one be saved without the Name. Such a person must ultimately fall in Hell” 22. Because Sikhism believes in rebirth, the second interpretation seems to be more reasonable. But because reference to hell and the city of Yama are made several times, it is possible that according to Sikh belief sinners have to spend more time in hell before taking rebirth. In any case men who are engaged in good deeds and the devotion to God find release from the cycle of birth and death, such persons are reunited with God and attain total bliss.

Ultimate Reality

The ultimate destiny of man according to Sikhism is to be free from the chain of birth and death and be reunited with God. Thus, it has both a negative and positive aspect. Negatively it is from the cycle of birth and rebirth, and positively, it is union with God. The trouble over the real meaning of the word ‘union or unity’ with God may very well be exemplified by the following passage from Nanak himself, in which likeness with God and blending with God are both taken as the final destiny of man - “He who is immersed in his love day and night know him immanent in the three worlds and throughout all time. He becomes like him whom he knows. He becomes wholly pure, his body is sanctified and God dwells in his heart as his only love. Within him is the word, he is blended in the True one” 23.

As ways to final release, Sikhism recommends the following performing various deeds, efforts at cleaning the self of all the evil passions, Nama Simaran, i.e. repeating by heart the name of God, taking shelter in a Guru etc. But despite all effort’s salvation is not possible without the grace of God. God’s grace is necessary even in moulding one towards making sincere efforts for salvation. “All we receive is by the grace of the beneficent one” 24. Again “He, the one dwells within all, but He is revealed to him who receives grace” 25. Karma determines the nature of our birth, but it is through grace that the salvation is found.

Generally speaking, a spiritual teacher is a Guru. But who can be taken as a spiritual teacher perhaps, he who has attained exemplary spiritual perfection by disowning all evil passions and who has realized the true nature of the world, self and God. Such a Guru is necessary in Sikhism to help attaining liberation. But who was the Guru of Guru Nanak and who is the Guru after Guru Gobind Singh. As a matter of fact Nanak himself as well as some other Gurus like Guru Arjan Dev and Guru Gobind Singh take God himself to be the real Guru. Thus in Sikhism, the word Guru is sometimes used in the sense of a human Guru and sometimes in the

sense of God himself.

The Sikh Discipline (Prayer etc.)

Sikhs are disciplined in character. They are required to obey the orders of the Guru. But the main problem is that who can be called a Guru. Generally, speaking, a spiritual teacher is a Guru. This has been clearly explained in the previous paragraph on 'ultimate reality'. Guru Arjan makes the point explicitly clear when he says "The true Guru is Niranjana (God). Do not believe that he is in the form of a man" 26. Thus, in Sikhism, the word Guru is sometimes used in the sense of a humanguru and sometimes of God himself. Hence the Sikh discipline mainly consists in cleaning the mana or atman of these evil passions.

In order to get rid of egoism and self-centeredness, Nanak has propounded a path of Sadhana. The Sadhana consists firstly in recognizing that God is present in all creations, particularly in human atman, and that he is the only reality to be adored. The next step is to meditate on divine qualities and sincere devotion and love towards God. Through such a meditation, the mana is gradually cleansed of the evil passions and man becomes free from the Haumai. Nama Simaran, i.e. in repeating God's name, is also given very importance in Sikh religion. But mere repeating the name is decried by the Sikh Gurus. As a matter of fact, Sikhism denies the efficacy and value of all that is external and mechanical. It also denounces pilgrimage, holy bath etc if they are done without a pure and loving heart, besides nama-simaran, Sikhism also plans bhajan and Kirtan. "If the mana is uncleaned, how can it be purified by worshipping stones, visiting places of pilgrimage, wandering around as an ascetic 27. Thus, idolatry, asceticism pilgrimage etc are all ridiculed by Sikhs. It is a religion of inward discipline, and not of external, hypocritical practices. Then again although pilgrimage is decried and discouraged in Sikhism, many Sikhs take it as their sacred duty to travel to the birth place of Guru Gobind Singh on his birth anniversary to pay their homage to him.

2. Conclusion

From the details furnished above it is clear that Sikhism contains all the aspects of philosophical importance otherwise mentioned in all the religions of the world. The Adi Granth which is the sacred book of the Sikhs is respected by the whole world of Sikhs with utter devotion just as the Vedas and Upanishads for the Hindus, Bible for the Christians and Quran for the Mohammedans. Both Mohammad, the prophet of Islam and Adi Granth preceptor Guru Gobind Singh were illiterate but they have given something to the world which is unthinkable.

A 'glossary' is given at the end showing the Sikh dynasty.

References

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- [9] Adi Granth P/504, 596
- [10] Four religions of Asia, Herbert Stroup P/194-195
- [11] Ibid P/195
- [12] Adi Granth P/908
- [13] Ibid P/294
- [14] Ibid P/913
- [15] Four religions of Asia, Herbert Stroup P/196 16. Ibid P/197, P/198
- [16] Adi Granth P/5
- [17] Four religions of Asia Herbert Stroup P/198
- [18] Adi Granth P/156
- [19] Ibid P/146
- [20] Ibid P/1028
- [21] Ibid P/934
- [22] Ibid P/7-8
- [23] Ibid P/5
- [24] Ibid P/931
- [25] Ibid P/895
- [26] Ibid P/886.

Glossary

- 1) Guru Nanak (1469-1539).
- 2) Guru Angad (1504-1552). He introduced Gurumukhi script.
- 3) Guru Amar Das (1479-1574).
- 4) Guru Ram Das (1534-1581).
- 5) Guru Arjan Dev (1563-1606).
- 6) Guru Arjan Dev built a temple 'Hari Mandir' which developed into Golden Temple in the 19 Century through the munificence of Maharaja Ranjit Singh. He also prepared what ultimately took the form of Adi Granth Sahib in 1604.
- 7) Guru Hargobind (1595-1644). He assumed two swords Piri and Miri and sat on a seat and called it Akal-Takht. 'Miri' stands for earthly power, and, 'Piri' stands for spiritual power. Thus a Guru is a soldier and a saint.
- 8) Guru Hari Rai (1630-1661).
- 9) Guru Hari Krishan (1656-1664).
- 10) Guru Teg Bahadur (1621-1674).
- 11) Guru Gobind Singh (1666-1708).