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SIKHISM : AN ATTEMPT AT RELIGIOUS SYNTHESIS AND UNITY

Some thoughtful observers have been pointing out for quite some time now that mankind is in the throes of a severe crisis. The expressions used to characterize the twentieth century convey, one way or the other, significant aspects of man's predicament. Our age has been variously described as an "age of anxiety," and "age of revolt" and an "age of unreason." In spite of all the advances made by science and technology, there seems to be something wrong with human affairs. The words of St. Paul that "there is fighting without and fear within" describe the stark reality of the situation today. Religion seems to be the only remedial force to eradicate this 'fear within' and the 'fighting without' and to enable man to enjoy 'the promised land.'

Religion is not a formal and aimless system of arid beliefs and mechanical rituals. Nor is it the 'opium of the people' as Karl Marx and his followers would have us believe, something not only incapable of bringing about social justice but actually antagonistic to it. It does not end, as it appears to many, with cultivating mystical experiences and practising a few mysterious rites connected with birth, marriage and death. Religion has, as amply evidenced by archaeology and history, played an important part in all the civilizations known to man, and it is bound to play a crucial role in the present day world as well. While conceding the universal significance of religion, we should concede the widespread ignorance of it as well. Not much effort seems to have been made to find out what really constitutes religion because this task has till recently remained in the hands of priests and was never considered in academic discipline. It has generally been looked upon as reactionary basically, and opposed to all change and progress. This concept has generally been used in a somewhat loose and subjective manner and, what is more important, in the ways that best served the interests of their authors.

The various definitions of religion can be reduced, broadly speaking, to two categories according to the broad conceptual thrust implied in them.

In the first category can be included those definitions which conceptualize religion as a divine experience without making any reference to its social correlates. We may apply this only to the esoteric or psychological or spiritual aspect of religion, but not to the whole of it. Among the advocates of this school of thought could be included Alfred Bertholet who defines religion as "the complex of man's interrelations with the superhuman powers;"¹ George Galloway who says that religion is "man's faith in a power beyond himself whereby he seeks to satisfy emotional needs and gains stability of life which he expresses in acts of worship and service;"² and Einstein who spells out religion as the "rejection of selfish desires and preoccupation with thoughts, feelings and aspirations of super-personal values."³ The aim of religion, according to the advocates of this theory, is the uplift of the soul by bringing to it freedom from mind and matter and then coalscing it with the Supreme Soul.

The second category which includes religion's exoteric objectives recognizes religion as essentially a social phenomenon. It endows religion with the obligation of "promoting the virtues of social service, neighbourliness and humanitarian or social ethics."⁴ "In this sense, religion is just "man's means of adjusting himself to his physical and social environment and to the universe."⁵ This point of view finds good support from the Marxist critics.

However, each of these two conceptualizations of religion is by itself only partly true. A true religion should endeavour to maintain stability and equilibrium of keeping close to each other the parallel streams of internal and external life. Religion is neither a matter of the heart alone nor is it a mere social phenomenon. Religion, no doubt, must be embedded in society because only then can we raise the moral and ethical standard of the people, something which is vital for spiritual enlightenment.

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1. Alfred Bertholet, "Religion," in Edwin Seligman ed. *Encyclopaedia of the Social Sciences* (Macmillan and Co., New York; 1934), pp. 228-37.
 2. George Galloway, *The Philosophy of Religion* (T. and T. Clark. Edinburgh; 1914), p. 184.
 3. Albert Einstein, "Science and Religion", in Daniel J. Bronstein and Herold M. Schulweis, ed. *Approaches to the Philosophy of Religion* (Prentice-Hall, Eaglewood Cliffs; 1954), p. 68.
 4. John Eric Nordskog, *Sacial Change* (McGraw Hill, New York; 1960), p. 288.
 5. *Ibid.*, p. 292.

The Sikh approach to life is two-fold. It envisages a "close inter-connected relationship between the spirit and the body".⁶ It does not consider this world a mere *maya*, something to be shunned by whosoever wants to attain the metaphysical object of life. On the other hand, it considers this world the abode of the True Lord⁷ and declares *mukti*, i.e. liberation possible for a man who lives a full-blooded life in the world.⁸ Since the religious and spiritual life of man is embedded in society, the need to raise his moral and ethical standards is inherent without which spiritual attainment is not possible.

Sikhism accepts man as a whole, and seeks in his improvement the advancement of society. In the teachings of Guru Nanak, religion is presented "as a matter of the heart, and of ethical conduct, and not mere outward formality".⁹ It is perhaps the result of its ability to discard what was decrepit and degenerate and retain that was genuine and worthy that Sikhism has been able to bring together two vital but in some ways contradictory culture-forms represented by Hinduism and Islam in a "common fold of spiritual and social brotherhood".¹⁰

Every religion has absorbed in some way or the other what was good in the religious traditions already in existence. Since no religion was ever founded for a certain section of society and had the whole of mankind as its prospective beneficiary, the spiritual preceptors who happened to found it never hesitated to accept whatever good and worthy there was in their heritage though it never discouraged them from discarding what was effete and obsolete. The existing faiths give birth to and shape the form of every new religion. That is why they bear some likeness with one another. It was in this context that Sikhism was also said to have "born out of a wedlock between Hinduism and Islam".¹¹ Thereafter, however, it developed a personality of its own and soon" grew into a faith which had some

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6. Dalip Singh, *Universal Sikhism* (Bahri Publications, New Delhi; 1979), p. 24.
 7. Guru Granth Sahib, I, P. 463 (*ihu jagu sachai ki hai kojhari sache kã vichi vãsũ*).
 8. Guru Granth Sahib, V, P. 522 (*hasandiã khelandiã painandiã khãvandiã viche hovai mukti*).
 9. Harbans Singh, *Guru Nanak and Origins of the Sikh Faith* (Asia Publishing House, Bombay; 1969), P. 60.
 10. R.C. Majumdar, *The History and Culture of the Indian People* (Delhi Sultanate volume), P. 569.
 11. Khushwant Singh, *A History of the Sikhs*, vol. I (Oxford University Press, Delhi, 1963; rpt. 1978), p. 17.

semblance to Hinduism, some to Islam, and yet had features which bore no semblance to either.”¹²

Thus, the cultural and religious heritage did give to the founders of the Sikh faith certain values which got synthesized into this new faith, but it will be wrong to say that Sikhism synthesized whatever values were represented by Hinduism, Islam and other prevailing religious and cultural traditions. Sikhism was born in an Indian society where Hinduism was the dominant religion, and Islam was the faith professed by the ruling class. Hinduism and Islam represented two different and in some ways contradictory culture-forms. Hinduism “was tolerant in its religious attitude, but had developed a rigidly corseted social structure.”¹³ The idea of divine sanction behind the ethnic inequality it advocated was unknown to the world beyond the Indian shores. The low-castes and the outcastes not only lived an ostracized social life but were also declared unworthy and incapable of attaining the ultimate union with God. On the other hand, Islam had quite a liberal social structure, but was bigoted and fanatical in its religious belief. All non-Muslims were considered *qāfirs* or atheists and to convert them persuasion or otherwise into Muslims was the sacred duty of every true Muslim.

Besides these two prominent religions, Buddhism and Jainism were also in existence. They had once shaken Hinduism off its feet, but now both of them existed in name only. Since these latter laid much emphasis on the purgatory functions of physical torture and on the renunciation of the world, they had become irrelevant in the peculiar north Indian society of those days and Sikhism could never identify itself with the values they represented. The *naths* and *yogis* also put renunciation of the world above everything else. Since man is primarily a social being and his renunciation of the world is the very opposite of that, these latter traditions did not find favour with the spiritual-preceptors of the Sikh faith. There are quite a few references to them in the Sikh Scripture, but these are made only to denounce the values they stood for.

The conflict between the culture-forms represented by Hinduism and Islam could not have gone on for ever and efforts had to begin in the social, cultural and religious spheres moving towards a synthesis. These efforts might have been given impetus by the natural human instinct, ‘to live and let live.’ And it was perhaps the result of this desire that had grown among

12. *Ibid.*, p. 17.

13. Harbans Singh, *op. cit.*, pp. 37-38.

the people of both the traditions that gave birth to the Bhakti movement in Hinduism and Sufism in Islam. They can by no stretch of imagination, be called renaissance movements in their respective faiths as a departure from the orthodoxy was quite obvious in both of them. They were perhaps the first attempt towards bringing Hinduism and Islam closer to each other so as to create a spirit of tolerance. History then left it to the genius of Guru Nanak and his nine successors to harness this spirit and give it a positive content in the shape of what later came to be known as Sikhism.

This spirit of tolerance of religious ferment did not remain confined to any particular region, but was at work throughout the length and breadth of the country. Chaitanya in Bengal, Ramanand and Kabir in Uttar Pradesh, Mira Bai in Rajasthan, Namdev, Trilochan and Paramanand in Maharashtra, Sadhna in Sindh and many more like them were saying the same thing in different languages and in different *milieus*. By the fifteenth century, the influence of the Bhakti movement was more powerful than that of the Brahmanical Hinduism. In the realm of religious speculation, these Bhaktas held that God is one; the best way to approach Him is to submit to His will; one can find Him only with the help of the *gurū* and through the means of *bhakti*; all men are born equal; and renunciation is not a necessary prerequisite for the ultimate union with God. Some of these *bhaktas* even took "positive steps towards a rapprochement with Islam."¹⁴

Similarly, Sufism also played its part in bridging the gulf that had opened up between Hinduism and Islam. The Muslim invaders who not only destroyed many non-believers (*qāfirs*) and their places of worship but also forcibly converted many of them to Islam came to be looked upon as foreign invaders who must be resisted. Contrary to the beliefs of these Muslim conquerors, the cardinal principle of the Sufis was *talif-i-kulūb* or stringing together of hearts. The Hindus thus found a friendly class among the Muslims who were earlier only a terrorizing force. Many Hindus willingly became converts to Islam under their influence. Of course, many of these proselytes belonged to the lower castes who were looked down upon by the so-called 'twice-born' among the Hindus. By the beginning of the fifteenth century, there were several Sufi orders prevalent in northern India. The most important name among the Sufis in Punjab was that of Farid, some of whose hymns are included in the Sikh Scripture.

14. Khushwant Singh, *op. cit.*, p. 24.

Guru Nanak (1469–1539), the founder of the Sikh faith, was born at a time when the spirit of religious ferment had already taken root. People who knew little or nothing about one another were feeling the pull of the *zeitgeist*. Guru Nanak was deeply influenced by this heritage and was greatly indebted to it. However, he was genius who could not only be influenced by his *milieu* but could in turn influence the *milieu* as well. That is why we find in his teachings not only a synthesis of a great deal of what he inherited but also a denunciation of certain values and a complete transformation of many more which did not fit in to his scheme of things. This is what makes Sikhism in spite of all that synthesis a separate and distinct religion and not a movement within a religion or an offshoot of an existing one.

The Sikh Gurus did not envisage the possibility of simply placing a new religion alongside a variety of other religions already in vogue. They had the whole of mankind in view and wanted it to accept their teachings and thus form a common fraternity. Their criticism of the degeneration and decadence that had set in in the existing religions was aimed at preaching a religion that was pure and simple. They never condemned a religion as such but only the formalism that had engulfed the very spirit of religion. It was perhaps for the first time in the religious history of mankind that a religion accepted the validity of other religions as well and declared that all paths lead to the same Divine Portal.¹⁵

Some of the metaphysical doctrines and conceptualizations are, no doubt, identical or almost identical with those of some other faiths with which it came into contact at the time of its inception. For example, it is in agreement with Hinduism in regard to the theory of transmigration and the idea of heaven or hell. The Hindu concept of *mukti* or liberation has been further extended to that of *jīvanmukti*, and the Hindu belief that this world is a mere *māyā* is given an entirely new orientation whereas the Hindu belief that renunciation of the world is a necessary prerequisite for God-realization is rejected outright. Similarly, the Hindu faith in the incarnation of God and in ethnic inequality or in the divine sanction behind this inequality are also rejected. Like Islam, Sikhism is monotheistic, but it does not consider its spiritual-preceptors (*Gurus*) as incarnations of God. Guru Gobind Singh declares in very unequivocal terms that he is not God, but a

15. Guru Granth Sahib, III, p. 853 (jagatu jalandā rakhi lai apāni kirpā dhāri/jitu duārai ubarai titai lehu ubāri).

slave of the Supreme Lord and that whosoever considers him as such must suffer the pangs of hell.¹⁶ Similarly, the Sikh concepts of heaven or hell and that of the life after death are also quite different from what Islam has to say on these aspects.

Guru Granth Sahib, the scripture of the Sikhs, is not simply a scripture to the Sikhs: it is Guru Eternal to them. Earlier, the word of the ten spiritual-preceptors, from Guru Nanak (1469-1539) to Guru Gobind Singh (1666-1708) guided them. Now the word incarnate in the Guru Granth Sahib is their true guide. They venerate, not worship, the Holy Volume as their living Guru, after Guru Gobind Singh conferred the pontifical status on it in 1708 just before his death, and invariably seek its blessing and guidance at every stage in their lives. All the the Sikh Gurus from Guru Nanak to Guru Arjan, the fifth in the line of ten spiritual-preceptors, composed their own verses and preserved them, but it was Guru Arjan who compiled the compositions of his predecessors and his own into a volume.¹⁷ No doubt, the immediate cause behind the compilation of the scripture is said to have been the Guru's wish to protect it against any possible interpolation of apocryphal writings and perpetuate it in its pure and chaste form for the benefit of posterity, but the Guru certainly had a wider vision, a deeper purpose.

The Sikh scripture, as it was compiled by Guru Arjan and as it stands today because any alteration in the word as contained therein is considered a mortal sin, comprises compositions of six of the Sikh Gurus and of about three dozen other saints belonging to other religious traditions. *Among these saints* and mystics are both Hindus and Muslims such as Kabir and Farid. They also include those belonging to the lower castes. Namdev is a calico printer and tailor, Ravidas a shoe-maker, and Kabir a weaver. All compositions in the scripture irrespective of their authorship command equal respect. Sikhs hold them in equal reverence and do not give precedence to a verse of Guru Nanak over the verse of either Kabir or Farid or Ravidas or Dhanna (a contributor to the scripture who, was a peasant by profession).

16. Guru Gobind Singh, *Bachitra Nātak* (*je ham ko paramesar ucharihai |te sabh naraki kund mahi parihai*)

17. The compilation of the scripture was completed in 1603-04 and writing the original manuscript in the hand of Bhāi Gurdās who acted as an amanuensis with Guru Arjan at that time is still preserved at Kartārpur in the Punjab. However, Guru Gobind Singh (1666-1708) later on incorporated the hymns of Guru Tegh Bahadur, the ninth Guru of the Sikhs.

The very fact that Guru Arjan included the compositions of all these Hindu and Muslim saints and that Guru Gobind Singh conferred on the scripture comprising all these the pontifical status implies that the Sikh Gurus felt that a synthesis of all religious forces was possible and theirs was perhaps the first ever attempt in that direction. Guru Granth Sahib is a unique compilation in this respect. No other religious scripture belonging to any tradition has ever made an attempt at religious synthesis with a view to uniting the whole of mankind into one.

If compositions of saints and mystics from both the Bhakti movement and Sufism find place in the Sikh scripture inspite of the fact that Sikh spiritual doctrines at places vary from what these two movements stood for, it was because they are one with Sikhism insofar as the moral and social values are concerned. For instance, unlike the Brahmanical Hinduism, the Bhakti movement condemned ethnic inequality¹⁸ and moral degeneration¹⁹ in the contemporary Indian society.

In the Indian society sharply divided into religions, classes and castes, Sikhism was the only forum which did not distinguish between man and man on any such grounds. This idea of equality was not confined to men-folk, it included women too. It holds that every human soul is a particle of the Supreme Soul and that all are equal in the eyes of their Creator.²⁰ Caste was of no consequence in realizing God and reaching the pinnacles of human glory.²¹ This is what is said at several places in the Sikh scripture and this is what the Sikh Gurus tried to prove when they included the hymns of the saints belonging to the low castes. Guru Gobind Singh destroyed all barriers of class and caste when he baptized his followers by making them drink *amrit* or nectar from the same vessel. The Sikh institutions of *sangat* and *pangat* are two living examples of practising what the Sikh Gurus preached in their lifetime. All human beings spring from the same source and after death merge into the same. A hymn of Guru Gobind Singh expresses the same idea with the help of beautiful metaphors :

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18. Guru Granth Sahib, Kabir, p. 324 (*jau tū brahman brahmanī jāī tau ān bāt kāhe nahī āīā*) . . . *kahu Kabir jo Brahm bichārai/so brahman Kahātu hai hamārai*).
19. Guru Granth Sahib, Trilochan, p. 525 (*antaru mali nirmalu nahī kinā bāhari bhekh udāsī/ hīradai kamalu ghati Brahm nā chīnā kāhe bhoīā sannyāsī*).
20. Guru Granth Sahib, I, p. 83 (*jāī mahi joti joti mahi jāīā*)
21. *Ibid.*, p. 1330 (*jāī janamu nāh pūchīai sach gharu lehu batāī/sā jāī sa pāī hai jehe karam kamāī*)

As out of a single fire
Millions of sparks arise;
Arise in separation
But come together again
When they fall back in the fire.

As from a heap of dust
Grains of dust swept up
Fill the air, and filling it
Fall in a heap of dust.

As out of a single stream
Countless waves rise up
And, being water, fall
Back in water again.

So from God's form emerge
Alive and inanimate things
And since they rise from Him
They shall fall in Him again.²²

22. Guru Gobind Singh, *Akāl Ustati*. English translation has been taken from the UNESCO publication *Selections from the Sacred Writing of the Sikhs*, p. 269.