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ETHICS OF CREATIVE ENLIGHTENMENT AND ACTIVISM IN SIKHISM

Everything may be looked at from two different points of view; one, we may take things simply as they are, how they came into being and what their relationship is with other things. We may call this fact, a field most appropriate for natural sciences. Secondly, we may compare these things with some ideal which indicates what they ought to be. We may call this idealism, a field for normative or critical sciences. Whereas the natural science deal with the description and explanation of things as they are, the normative science concerns itself with our judgements on those things. Ethics, naturally, belongs to the latter category because its subject-matter is human conduct and character not as natural facts with a history and causal connections with other facts but as possessing value in view of a standard or ideal.

Broadly speaking, ethics can be divided into three distinct types; ethics of law, ethics of redemption and ethics of creativeness. Viewed in this light, the Hindu and Islamic ethics which are guided by the codes of Manu and the *shari'at*, respectively, are fundamentally the ethics of law whereas the Christian ethics can well be called the ethics of redemption. Unlike the former, the Sikh spiritual preceptors felt that the social ethics of man change with the changing times and, unlike the latter, Sikhism lays more emphasis on enlightenment and love of God than even on the liberation of soul.¹ Thus, Sikh ethics can be called, in the words of Dr. Trilochan Singh, "the ethics of Creative Enlightenment and Activism."² Dr. Avtar Singh defines Sikh ethics in the same spirit but in a more elaborate way when he says that the ethics of the Sikhs may be understood "to embrace the theory of good, evil, right

1. *Guru Granth*, V, p. 534 (*raju nā chāhau mukti nā chāhau mani prīti charan kamalāre*).

2. Trilokan Singh, *Guru Nanak's Religion: A Comparative Study of Religions* (Rajkamal Prakashan, Delhi: n.d.), p. 18.

and wrong as found in the teachings of the Sikh Gurus . . . which are now consolidated in the *Ādi Granth*, the principal scripture of the Sikhs"³ including, of course, the traditions of *rahitnāmās* and the Sikh Rahat Maryādā. According to him, Sikh ethics contains values in human conduct as found in the *Ādi Granth* as well as those of the life rules insofar as they do not conflict with the former in which case the former prevails over the latter.

Since moral and ethical life as against unethical and amoral conduct is the temporal aspect of religion—the other aspect being the spiritual one—the ethical tests are of paramount significance in judging the real importance of a religion *vis-à-vis* society. Guru Nanak places morals and ethics above everything else: "Truth is higher, but higher still is truthful living."⁴ Realization of Truth is a noble ideal on the spiritual side of life, but truthful living, which includes the behavioural pattern of man in his social intercourse, is nobler on the ethical side. This clearly brings out the distinction between Sikh ethics and the ethics of those religions and religious sects which preach escape from the filial and social obligations. Sikhism preaches that religious and spiritual life should be embedded in society because only then can we raise the moral and ethical standards of humanity.

On the spiritual plane, Sikhism acknowledges the existence of the unicity of God and believes in it. Mankind is exhorted to submit itself to His will after causing the cessation of ego because only then can the duality be ended, paving the way for man's ultimate union with Him. He is the Supreme Being, responsible for all that is and has been going on in this and other universes, and He is self-existent, thereby rejecting the theory of His incarnation. It is through the constant remembrance of Him that man can attain His grace which can further help him realize his ultimate end. Talking about these attributes of God, Dr. Sher Singh opines that "all qualities that man considers good are projected by him in his God in an absolute form."⁵ He is absolute goodness and, as expressed in the New Testament, "there is none good but one; that is God."⁶ As for the evil, it represents

3. Avtar Singh, *Ethics of Sikhs* (Punjabi University, Patiala : 1983), p. 1.

4. *Guru Granth*, I, p. 62 (*sachahu orai sabhu ko upari sachu achāru*).

5. Shar Singh, *Philosophy of Sikhism* (Sterling Publishers, Delhi : 1966), p. 204.

6. Mt. 19:17 and Lk 18:19.

in Sikhism only a stage when man is still in darkness and as soon as man has or begins to have divine knowledge, the evil vanishes. God is the creator, but not an entity different from His creation: He is both Transcendent and Immanent. He pervades through all His creation.⁷

Sikhism which is the most modern and said to be the most practical of religions the world over rejects both escapism, i.e., renunciation of the world in search of God-realization, and individualism. The former down-graded the life of a householder *vis-à-vis* an ascetic's or a mendicant's whereas the latter was a selfish notion which stood for the moral and spiritual uplift of the seeker alone. On the other hand, Sikhism prefers the householder's life to that of an ascetic and preaches that one could achieve the ultimate end of union with the Supreme Being while still enjoying the robust life of a householder.⁸ Secondly, the saint or the spiritual preceptor must not strive for his own salvation; rather he should work for the salvation of the whole of mankind. The Sikh scripture expects of all its followers to become *gurmukh*, i.e. oriented towards the Guru or God, and make so others as well.⁹ Bhai Gurdas, a Sikh savant whose compositions are revered only second to those of the Sikh Gurus, also looks at life from the same perspective when he uses the analogy of *pāras*, the philosopher's stone, for *gurmukh* who transforms all whom he comes in contact with.¹⁰

Righteousness and sincerity as against hypocrisy and dubiety are other distinguishing features of Sikh ethical life. Hypocrisy both in religious and social behaviour is severely condemned. The *pandits* who drew a line around their cooking-place so as to keep it free from all pollution while still harbouring the four vices in their hearts received a severe castigation.¹¹ Those who practised their Hindu rituals secretly within the confines of their house but donned the Muslim garb and followed the Muslim way of life in their social intercourse so as to win favours from the Muslim rulers are neither true Hindus nor true

7. Guru Granth, V, p. 296 (*jall thali mahīali pūriā suāmī sirjāṅharjanik bhānt hoi passariā Nānak ekaṅkār*).

8. Guru Granth, V, p. 522 (*hasāṅdiā khelaṅdiā panaṅhdiā viche hovai mukti*).

9. Guru Granth, I, p. 3 (*mannai tarai tāre gur sikh*).

10. Bhai Gurdas, 16:9

11. Guru Granth, I, p. 91 (*kubudhi dūmanī kudaīā kasaiṅ par niṅdā ghaṅ chāhayī muṅhī krodhi chaṅṅḍāli/kāri kaḍhī kiā thīai jā chāre baiḥīāṅ nāli*).

Muslims.¹² Ritual observances, mimes and external symbols such as matted hair, besmeared body and pierced ears have not much to do with one's spiritual and religious life. The wearing of the *janeu* which is regarded as symbolic of all ritualism and formalism, is denounced in favour of inculcating ethical virtues. Those who take these to be an end in themselves rather than as a means to a higher goal fail to attain self-realization. According to Sikhism, one should live a worldly life but still remain aloof from all worldly entanglements: the metaphor often used to explain the situation is that of the lotus which remains aloof from the mud in the water from which it gets its very sustenance and that of the goose which remains in the water but keeps its wings from getting wet. According to Sikhism, the love of God involves, what James Kellock says in a different context, "both a detachment and an attachment—a detachment from selfish comforts, interests, fears and passions, and a sincere attachment to a reality beyond all appearances that attracts us to Itself by truth and goodness."¹³

Ethnic equality of man and just behaviour on the part of the ruler are considered essential to enable man to reach the pinnacles of human glory as well as for the overall growth of the society. Sikhism holds that one does not become great by one's birth in a 'high' family; it is, on the other hand, the deeds done by men which determine his social status. In this context, the Sikh scripture seems to agree with *Dhammapada*, the Buddhist scripture containing proverbs and moral sentiments, which says that one cannot become a *brahman* by being born as such but it is the inculcation of virtues such as self-restraint, patience, contentment, humility, etc., which make him one.¹⁴ All human beings, irrespective of their caste, creed or colour, are equal in His eye and all these distinctions are man-made, having absolutely no divine sanction behind them. Everybody has the same divine spark shining forth in his spirit and can attain God-realization provided he follows the path shown him by the Guru.

The Sikh Gurus raised their voices for putting an end to the discrimination against womankind. The Indian society of those days considered woman as inferior to man. The birth of a female child

12. *Guru Granth*, I, p. 471 (*añtaṛi pājā paṛahi katebā sañjam turkā bhāi*).

13. James Kellock, *Ethical Studies* (The Christian Literature Society, Madras: 1959), p. 28.

14. *Dhammapada*, Gathas 393 and 396.

was always taken as a sad event thereby giving rise to the evil of infanticide. Since woman did not seem to have her own distinct entity she used to commit self-immolation on the pyre of her dead husband. Guru Nanak was the first personage in the religious history of mankind who endeavoured to give her a place of honour in society. Even when she continued to be identified with frailty in Europe,¹⁵ the Sikh Gurus expressed their sense of respect for her because it is she of whom are born the great and the mighty and everybody except the Supreme Lord alone owes his or her existence to the woman. Sikhism lays equal obligation on both man and woman as regards the virtues of chastity and fidelity. Adultery, stated to be one of the five evils, must be shunned by everyone¹⁶ and none, not even the king, can be exempted.¹⁷ Unlike Hinduism which permits perjury where an accused of a respectable caste may be saved from death by it, Sikhism does not show special regard for any caste: all are equal in His eye and all should be regarded as equal by the temporal law as well.

Sikhism disapproves of the oppression and exploitation of the weak. In several of his hymns, Guru Nanak enjoins upon the ruling Muslim class of the day to give up its policy of oppression and bigotry. In one of his hymns, popularly known as "Bābar-Yāñī", Guru Nanak has severely condemned Babur whose invading army committed untold cruelties on the innocent and hapless masses at the time of his invasion of India: "It pinches not my heart if the fight is between the two equals, but it is quite a different thing when a lion attacks the kine."¹⁸ The martyrdom of Guru Arjun and Guru Tegh Bahadur, the resort to arms by Guru Hargobind and Guru Gobind Singh in order to uphold human dignity and righteousness, and all those sacrifices made by the Sikhs during the eighteenth century are testimonies to the Sikh ideal of society devoid of all kinds of religious persecution and bigotry and based on the idea of ethnic equality, religious tolerance and universal brotherhood.

15. Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, Act I, Scene II.

16. "Rahitnamā Hazārī Bhāi Chaupā Singh Chibbār," in Piara Singh Padam, ed., *Rahitnama* (Kalam Mandir, Patiala: 1974), p. 72.

17. Giani Randhir Singh, ed., *Prem Sumarg* (Shiromani Gurudwara Prabandhak Committee, Amritsar: 1953), p. 110.

18. *Guru Granth*, I, p. 360 (*je saktā sakte kau māre tā man rēs no hoī/saktā sīh māre pai vajai khasamai sā pūrsāi*).

Apart from inculcating the virtues of truthfulness, altruism, justice, courage (which also includes fortitude), humility, etc., in his intercourse with society, Sikhism advises man to imbibe certain qualities, a moral character which, "in things great and small, private and public... is ultimately the element that counts most."¹⁹ Three cardinal virtues which one must cultivate in one's personal life are *kirt karnī*, i.e. earning by the sweat of one's brow, *nām japnā*, i.e. to meditate on the name of God, and *wanḍ chhakṇā*, i.e. to share the fruit of one's labour with the needy fellow human-beings.

As for the importance of *kirt* in general human life, there is a famous Greek proverb which says: "It is at the price of work that the gods sell us all the good things of life." The right attitude to work is that which regards it as our dutiful contribution to improve the social fabric to which we belong. Man should have the realization that *the* service to man is *the* service to God, and this realization should impart to all his work a quality that is sincere and honest. He should transfigure work through seeing it as done unto God and not unto any mortal being. Sikhism lays emphasis on honest and truthful ways of earning: the more truthful we are in our thought, word and deed, the more we are in the right relation to God. Many *sākhīs* from the life of Guru Nanak as well as of his successors testify that an honest man, in the words of Robert Burns, an eighteenth century English poet, 'is the noblest creation of God.'

Involvement in work never implies man's alienation from God. Sikh scripture and Sikh tradition is full of instances calling on man to do honest labour and simultaneously meditate on His Name. In fact, remembering God does not mean, in Sikhism, repeating one or the other name attributed to Him. It implies, on the other hand, attuning oneself to the Divine will, realizing the Divine presence at all times and all places, and always doing what is ethically and morally good.

Wanḍ Chhakṇā, i.e. sharing whatever one earns from his honest labour with one's fellow-beings, is both an individual and a social virtue. Like Shakespeare's mercy, it is twice-blessed: 'it bleaseth him that gives and him that takes.' Whereas it enables one on the personal

19. James Kellock, *op. cit.*, p. 9.

level to imbibe a sense of detachment from material gains, it gives birth to altruism on the social level. Sikhism is perhaps the only religion the world over which lays this kind of an obligation on its followers. Sikh *Rahit Maryādā*, i.e. the Sikh code of conduct makes it obligatory for all members of the Khālsa Brotherhood to set apart at least one-tenth of their earnings for communal and altruistic purposes.²⁰ However, Sikhism warns the altruist to guard against two possible evils: help to others must not be allowed to degenerate or to appear to degenerate into a sort of social pity and the altruist must not feel any personal glory in it. Since the Creator pervades His creation, service to mankind ought to be regarded as an opportunity for receiving Divine sanctification: help to the needy is regarded as even a gift unto the Guru.

20. *Sikh Rahit Maryādā* (Shiromani Gurudwara Prabandhak Committee, Amritsar: 1953), p. 9. Also, "Rahitnāmā Hajāri Bhāi Chaupā Singh Chibber," *op. cit.*, p. 76.