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Guru Nanak's Response to Religious Plurality

By

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Religious plurality is not a newly emerged phenomenon rather it has been a reality of human social existence ever since recorded human history. The only difference is that it was not experienced with the same intensity as it is being experienced in the world today. Also, the human perception of it has changed a lot during the past century or so. In the ancient past people belonging to different religious backgrounds lived in their limited geographical universes. As a result, they did not face the social or theological challenges arising from this plurality. However, situation has changed dramatically during the past century or so. The scientific and technological advancement especially in the fields of communication and transportation has transformed this world's multi-religious population into one global community. Now the religious, cultural and racial boundaries have been broken on a scale never imagined or experienced before. As a result, people with different religious, cultural and racial backgrounds now live as next door neighbours and interact and interpenetrate on almost daily basis.

The fast means of communication and transportation have, no doubt, brought diverse faith-communities physically closer, but the question remains whether they have become really welded into one world-community. Unfortunately, the kind of cordiality and trust that is required for cordial mutual relationship between different faith-communities for peace to prevail in society is missing. We find people with different religious backgrounds living like 'a medley of crowd in the market-place' indifferent to or distrustful of one another whereas the need of the day is to imbibe love and trust and concern for the other. This is in spite of the fact 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."¹ One major reason for the lack of mutual trust and understanding is the tendency to denigrate the religion of the other by calling it inferior or inauthentic or even totally fake, but we generally do so by comparing our scriptural truth with the others' religious practices. We conveniently forget that there is

always a gap, sometimes a big gap, between the scriptural truth and religious practice among almost all religious communities. Some claim monopoly over truth for their faith, calling their religion the only way and their prophet the only savior. Such an exclusivistic² approach towards other faiths and faith-communities is not conducive for peace and harmony in human society rather we need to realize that “there is a causal link between claims of religious superiority and calls to religious violence”.³

For peace and harmony in society, nay for our very survival, we must learn to accept and appreciate the ‘other’ with his ‘otherness’: we must cooperate with each other rather than clash with others. We must realize that all humans are one in essence, each one being a member of the larger human brotherhood. The need of the moment is not one religion, but mutual acceptance and respect for all religions and religious communities: any attempt to root out the multiplicity is nothing less than a sacrilege. Members of each faith-community, however small minority it may be, should have the freedom to follow their distinct religious beliefs and practices with the only stipulation that this freedom must not affect the freedom of others. Equally important is also the fact that they should make, in their own way, their contribution towards eco-human welfare.

If we wish to see different faith-communities in harmonious relationship with one another, we must accept other religions also as ‘vehicles of transcendent vision and human transformation’. It is true that each religion is an attempt at comprehending the ultimate Reality/Truth and each religion takes in life as a whole and recommends ways for its welfare. The only difference is that each religion ‘entails many metaphysical and other disagreements in the articulation of what is ‘transcendent’ and in making recommendations for ‘human transformation’. These ‘articulations’ and ‘recommendations’ do not change the essential unity. The fact that each religion

presents visions of God, world and humanity from a localized, historical perspective could possibly be the reason for differences in these ‘articulations’ and ‘recommendations’. God is infinite and all religious experiences of Him are finite. We must also realize that it depends on us whether we let this diversity of religions lead to their fruitful co-existence or result in their clash and thus put human survival in danger.

II

Religious plurality also marked the milieu in which was born Guru Nanak, the founder of the Sikh faith and whose 550th birth anniversary is being celebrated the world this year. Guru Nanak was born in AD 1469 at Talwandi Rai Bhoi Ki (now known as Nanakana Sahib) then in the north-west of India but now in Pakistan. Four major religions, apart from various sects within each one of them, prevailed in Guru Nanak’s contemporary milieu. Of the three religions of Indian origin, Hinduism happened to be the faith of a vast majority whereas Buddhists and Jainas comprised a small numerical minority. Islam, which happened to be the religion of the ruling class, was of Semitic origin but was able to find for itself a place on the Indian soil by that time.

As for these two dominant religions (i.e. Hinduism and Islam), the prevalent Hinduism was polytheistic whereas Islam was strictly monotheistic; if majority of Hindus worshipped idols, Islam was in a way iconoclastic. They stood in sharp contrast not merely in doctrine and ways of worship but also in elaborate social systems which governed daily life of their respective followers. The Muslims were *malechh*⁴ to the Hindus whereas the Hindus were *kafirs*⁵ for the Muslims. Hinduism claimed itself to be tolerant as it took other traditions as additional visions of the same divine Reality - but in reality it has been tolerant only as long as the other tradition is willing to accept its status of a sect under the broader umbrella of Hinduism; on the other hand, Islam being a missionary faith had strong belief in the

myth of its uniqueness and superiority. The political authorities used force to bring others into Islamic fold. However, the Sufi saints who made a deep impact on the common masses with the example of personal piety were more successful in converting people. The Bhakti and Sufi movements did contribute towards bringing both the communities down from the pinnacles of their respective orthodoxy, but still they did not fully succeed and both these communities still lived segregated and mutually opposed during the time of Guru Nanak.

All life-accounts of Guru Nanak unanimously agree that during his stay at Sultanpur, as he went for his daily ablutions in the Bein rivulet that flowed close by, he went 'missing' for three days. During this while, he had had a direct and intimate communion with the Divine. The Divine assigned him a specific mission and his entire following life is dedicated for the success of that mission. The Guru himself makes a veiled reference to it in one of his hymns⁶ and it is also found reiterated in all Janamsakhis or traditional life-accounts of the Guru.⁷ The doctrines he articulated were distinct from any of the earlier existing religious systems: in fact, he wanted to provide a new religious alternative to the people who felt fleeced and oppressed, on the one hand, by the priestly classes of all prevailing traditions and, on the other, by the political authority.

The first words he uttered after having had the divine encounter comprise a very significant statement of Guru Nanak's views on the 'other'. These words were: *na ko hindu na musalman*,⁸ lit., there is no Hindu and there is no Muslim. The words were not aimed at denigrating any faith or faith-community rather they embodied the Guru's cosmic vision which deemed all beings as God's own creation: this implied spiritual unity and ethnic equality of all beings. Guru Nanak made no distinction between man and man on the basis of his caste or creed, race or sex. It is also in this context that Bhai Gurdas, while referring to the Guru setting out on his preaching odysseys, says that the 'Guru set out

on a mission of lustrating and uplifting the entire humanity' transcending all sectarian considerations'.⁹

Guru Nanak's vision of the essential oneness of entire humanity has its basis in the doctrine of oneness of God. His perception of God as the creator of and immanent, *qua* Spirit, in the entire creation is at the basis of the Sikh idea of universal Fatherhood of God and universal brotherhood of humankind. Emphasizing the oneness of humanity, a scriptural hymn says that "no one is the 'other' and no one is enemy" (Guru Granth Sahib, p. 1299). Since all human beings have the body made up of the same perishable elements and the same divine Light within as their life-force, nobody is superior or inferior to the other: 'everybody should be called noble and none appears lowly or inferior to me because the Real One has created all beings and His Light pervades throughout the world,' says Guru Nanak in a hymn (GGS, p. 62). Sikhism rejects the notion of inequality and ineligibility on the basis of birth: it deems all beings equal amongst themselves as well as in His eye. "The same Lord is present in the Hindus as well as in Muslims," says another scriptural hymn (GGS, p. 483).

Apart from religion, another divisive force in society, especially in Indian society, has been the caste system: this caste-based division of humankind results in discrimination against a certain section of society declaring them the 'other' and the 'lowly'. They are also called ineligible for spiritual emancipation. Since Guru Nanak deems all beings equal amongst themselves as well as in the eyes of God, the idea of inequality or inferiority by birth is strongly rejected. Birth of a person in a particular caste or creed does not make him better or worse than any other. The idea has been aptly explained by the successive Gurus at several places in their hymns. A scriptural hymn says that "God is present, as Spirit, in each and every being; the entire humankind is one brotherhood and no one is deemed an outsider" (GGS, p. 97). 'God is the sole Father and the entire humankind are His

children”, says Guru Arjan in another hymn (GGS, 611). Guru Gobind Singh reiterates the same idea in very explicit words when referring to various creeds and their sects he says that ‘there are *vairagis* with shaven heads, sannyasis, yogis, celibates, Jain ascetics, Shi’ahs, Sunnis, Hindus and Turks, but we must recognize the entire human race as essentially one.’¹⁰

Guru Nanak emphasizes that it is not caste or creed in which one is born but the kind of deeds one does during one’s lifetime that make one a better or worse person. A religion which exhorts man to remember the Name Divine and perform noble, righteous deeds is deemed supreme amongst all religions (GGS, 266). Pride in one’s caste or creed is nothing rather the deeds done make one noble or ignoble, high or low. The Guru says that a Brahmin is not one born in a particular caste but a true Brahmin is he who reflects on Brahman and makes modesty and contentment his obligation (GGS, 1411). Writing about Guru Nanak’s visit to Mecca, Bhai Gurdas¹¹ refers to a question raised by certain Hajis as to who is greater of the Hindu and the Muslim. Guru Nanak’s reply was that no one becomes great by taking birth in a particular religion: both the Hindus and Muslims are bound to suffer in the absence of good deeds.

Similarly, belief in the myth a religion’s superiority is rejected as Guru Nanak collected a good corpus of hymns of holy men coming from different traditions having affinity with his own ideas. Later on these hymns were included in the Sikh scripture compiled by Guru Arjan in 1604. These contributors belong not only to different creeds (they are from the Bhakti as well as Sufi traditions), but they also come from different castes (some of them belong to the so-called lower castes), regions (e.g. if Shaikh Farid and Dhanna come from the West of India, Namdeva is from the south and Jaideva is from the east) and eras (e.g. historically, Shaikh Farid belongs to the twelfth century and happens to be the earliest while Guru Tegh Bahadur (1621-1675) is the latest). All the scriptural verses – may they be of the Gurus

or of any other saint-contributor – enjoy the same respect among the followers. All these compositions together as found in the Sikh scripture constitute the revelatory Word. In this way, Guru Nanak gave us the message that revelation is not religion-specific, caste-specific or region-specific. This attitude is at the basis of our acceptance and appreciation of religious plurality. Today the Sikhs acknowledge and revere the Word as contained in the scripture, Guru Granth Sahib, as their Guru or spiritual preceptor.

However, the Sikh acceptance of other faiths has been critical because deeming all religions relative would undermine the concern to distinguish the spiritually wholesome and profound from the spiritually moribund. All religions are not the same, yet one can perceive a sort of unity behind all their differences, and Sikhism expects all of them to be equal participants in the struggle for ‘eco-human welfare’. It is not advisable to be neutral to all values in order to become a pluralist. That is why the Guru Nanak is quite vocal on certain vital points. For example, he is critical of the sanctions and safeguards in a religion favoring the hierarchical division of humankind into *varnas* or sexes; it condemns the idea of world-negation and life-negation; and it is against mobilization of mass support in the name of religion with the object of actually serving the interests of the prevalent ruling political class against the common weal. Guru Nanak is very explicit in condemning the priestly class (Brahmin among the Hindus and Mull’ah and Qazi among Muslims) which misinterpreted and misused religion to retain status quo for actually saving their elitist status vis-à-vis others.

When Guru Nanak refers to the degeneration prevalent among Hindus or Muslims in his hymns, he nowhere tries to denigrate the religion they belong to. Proselytizing devalues the religion of the other whereas mutual witnessing promotes mutual love and respect. Guru Nanak rejects proselytizing and favours freedom of faith and belief for all. All religions with their

diverse beliefs and practices are accepted as authentic paths towards self-realization. Instead of condemning other religions, he asks everyone to be true to his or her faith: a Hindu should become a true Hindu and a Muslim a true Muslim. In this process, Guru Nanak does criticize both of them for mistaking the external symbols and marks as an end without imbibing the values they symbolize and for placing complex rituals over the ‘spirit’ of religion. Referring to the sacred thread (*janeu*) of the Hindus, he says that wearing of *janeu* is of any spiritual benefit only if the cotton (of which the thread is spun) externalizes the wearer’s inner value of compassion, thread of contentment, twists to the thread of higher moral conduct and knots of chastity and so on (GGS, 471). Implicitly, he wants the Hindus to imbibe such values to be called true Hindus and worthy of wearing the sacred thread. Referring to Muslims, the Guru says that a Muslim says Namaz five times a day and has given a different name to each of these five prayers, but offering of these prayers becomes acceptable to the Divine only if each of these five produces a value in the devotee – living a truthful life, earning through honest means, seeking welfare of all, having noble intentions and singing eulogies of God: only he who lives *kalima* this way can call himself a true Muslim (GGS, 141). These and such other comments make an obvious statement that Guru Nanak does not favour conversion rather he exhorts each one to imbibe the values his or her religion espouses and thus be true to his/her faith.

Not only all religions are authentic ways, all scriptures are also authentic and valid in the eyes of Guru Nanak. “Neither the Vedas (i.e. Indian scriptural literature) nor the Katebas (i.e. Semitic scriptures) be called false rather false are the persons who do not reflect on them,” says Guru Nanak (GGS, 1350). Also, God in Guru Nanak’s perception being all-pervasive, all places of worship irrespective of the tradition they belong to are accepted as the abode of Divine. Thus, a Sikh must not revile or desecrate another community’s place of worship because reviling

or desecrating it would mean reviling or desecrating the Divine Presence itself. God is believed to be present not only in the temple and the mosque but at all other places also. Guru Gobind Singh, in one of his compositions, makes an explicit statement saying that “Dehura (i.e. temple) and mosque are the same; the (Hindu) worship and (Muslim) Namaz are the same; entire humankind is (essentially) one, and delusion it is to deem them different.”¹² Sikh history stands witness that the Sikhs did not desecrate or demolish any Muslim religious place even in Sirhand when in early eighteenth century they conquered the town and killed Wazir Khan, governor of the province: for the Sikhs, Wazir Khan was the most hated person who was responsible for waging several wars against Guru Gobind Singh and also for bricking alive his younger sons, aged nine and seven. Even the town itself was considered ‘accursed’ by the Sikhs. All the old tombs and mosques in Sirhand still stand intact.

III

Guru Nanak not only preached these precepts advising us to accept and appreciate the religion of the other but also established certain institutions to live those precepts. During his preaching odysseys, he visited religious centres of different traditions, met many saints and savants there and held dialogue with them. He has said in one of his hymns that ‘first listening to the viewpoint of the other and then putting forth your own is the only way to reach the truth’ (GGGS, 661). His ‘Sidha Gosti’, a longish composition included in the Sikh scripture, is a genuinely authentic version of the dialogue the Guru had with the *siddhas*: herein various *siddhas* put many searching questions to the Guru who answers their queries with courtesy and confidence. Sobriety and serenity are maintained throughout and the aim is to realize truth. The pluralist theologians today accept dialogue – a constructive and meaningful dialogue – at the basis of religious pluralism, and Guru Nanak was perhaps the first person to use interfaith dialogue as a means to understand and

appreciate the other with the objective of bringing about harmony in inter-community relations.

Reference to an incident from the life of Guru Nanak here would be apt to illustrate his response to religious plurality. During one of his preaching odysseys, when Guru Nanak reached Multan (now in Pakistan), various holy persons belonging to different religious traditions came to the outskirts of the town to meet him with a bowl filled to the brim with milk. This implied that the place was already full of many religious traditions and there was no place for any new one. The Guru placed a jasmine petal on the milk signifying that his tradition would co-exist with others and he did not want to replace any.¹³ Such co-existence among all religions and religious communities is the need of the day, and teachings of Guru Nanak are quite relevant in this regard.

After his preaching odysseys covering almost the entire length and breadth of India and even beyond, Guru Nanak settled down at what is today known as Kartarpur (in Pakistan). All the persons who came there to see the Guru would meet every morning and evening in the form of *sangat* presided over by the Guru himself. The *sangat* is a body of men and women who meet together to recite the Name Divine. Apart from its significance in the religious life, it has far-reaching social implications as well. Besides helping one in one's spiritual quest, it helps "forge a community of purpose as well as of action based on mutual equality and brotherhood. It has become a sort of melting pot for the high and the low, the so-called twice-born and the outcastes"¹⁴ because everybody participating in the congregation is given equal respect without any consideration of his social or religious background. Bhai Gurdas refers to eleven persons by name who regularly participated in the Kartarpur congregation, and among these eleven, two were Muslims. There is no place for the feeling of 'other' in this new way of life emerging from the teachings of Guru Nanak. Another near-contemporary source says that the seekers who come to see

the Guru included the *gianis* or spiritually enlightened men of learning, ascetics, mendicants, Digambers and sannyasis, yogis and siddhas, celibates and householders, faqirs and darvesh, mystics and divines, Hindus and Muslims, noblemen and destitute, poets and songsters, Bhaktas and Sufis, Brahmins and Sudras, Vaishyas and Kshatris, Vaisnavites and shaven-heads, and so on.¹⁵

Langar or Guru-ka-Langar is a concomitant of *sangat*, where anybody is welcome to partake of common repast without being asked any questions about his faith. As an institution, it has since become almost an integral part of every Sikh holy place. I need not dilate upon this much as it is well known throughout the world that anybody coming to the Langar is served food without any prejudices whatsoever. Here prince and the pauper sit together at the same platform and share the same food communally prepared. These two institutions – Sangat and Langar serve as the best medium taking forward Guru Nanak's ideal of universal fraternity, completely negating the idea of the 'other'. Also, the prayer which the Sangat offers after every service in a shrine morning and evening concludes with the words seeking welfare of all – *sarbat da bhala*:

I would also like to refer here briefly to two post-Guru Nanak instances - the first highlights the Sikh acceptance of the different ways of worship of God and the second is a unique example of sacrifice for freedom of faith. Once some Sikhs called upon Guru Arjan (1563-1606), the fifth Guru of the Sikh faith, and told him that they felt confused seeing people worship God and His various incarnations and remembering Him by various names. They wanted to know by which Name they should remember God. The Guru is said to have advised them: All forms and attributes are God's, yet He transcends them, and that they should worship only the Absolute One. The Guru further asked them to abjure all rancor towards anybody who has

a different way of worship.¹⁶ The second instance is the martyrdom of Guru Tegh Bahadur, the ninth Guru of the Sikh faith. Neither the Guru nor the Emperor (under whose orders the Guru was executed) had anything personal against each other, but they stood clearly for ideals in stark opposition to each other. When the Guru took up the cause of the Kashmiri Pandits, it was a peculiar situation of self-prompted and meaningful suffering for the sake of others but to uphold a cherished ideal. The Guru suffered martyrdom opposing the denial of freedom of faith. Let it be made clear here that the Guru's move was certainly not against the Muslims in general, and had the contemporary political situation in India been the other way round, he would surely have made the same sacrifice for the sake of religious freedom of the Muslims.

A brief comment on an event from early twentieth century history of India would also be in place here as it clearly brings out the Sikh response to conversion as they have inherited it from Guru Nanak. It is about the Viakom movement in Kerala, in the south of India. Certain so-called low caste people had launched in 1924 a movement against the ban of their entry on to the roads near the Siva temple. These were the days when Ezhavas (people belonging a so-called low-caste in Kerala), for example, were required to keep a distance of sixteen feet from a Brahmin who deemed himself high-caste. Interestingly, there were no restrictions on the Muslim and Christian converts from these low castes. As per the records in the Kerala State Archives, if persons from these castes "became Christians and Mohomedans, the Travencore government is prepared to allow them to go along such roads."¹⁷ As the news about this movement against discrimination spread nation-wide, the Shiromani Gurdwara Parbandhak Committee, the elected body which governs historical Sikh shrines, sent a group of twelve Sikhs to help the agitators by providing them free food (*langar*) irrespective what caste or creed they belonged to. The agitators felt impressed by the Sikh philosophy of spiritual unity and

ethnic equality of all and expressed their desire to embrace Sikhism. Master Tara Singh, a senior Sikh leader in the Punjab, went to meet them and in a public lecture said: “Sikhs are offering their services to you...our aim is to help you in this critical situation. If you convert to Sikhism, we will render all the help to free you from this slavery. If you do not convert, even then we will help you as we did...”¹⁸ No doubt, some Keralites converted Sikhs and they were known as Ezva Sikhs, but the Sikh response was quite obvious: the help rendered unto them was no inducement to conversion.

IV

I would like to sum up by saying that Guru Nanak accepted and appreciated other religions and their scriptures as authentic and held that no religion can claim monopoly over revelation/truth. This view of Guru Nanak is reiterated, though entirely in a different context, by a modern theologian, Abraham Heschel, when he says: “God’s voice speaks in many languages communicating itself in a diversity of intuitions. The word of God never comes to an end. No word is God’s last word.” Guru Nanak asked everybody to be true to his or her faith and later on Guru Arjan and Guru Tegh Bahadur laid down their lives to uphold the right to freedom of conscience; this obviously implies the Sikhs’ opposition to the idea of religious superiority and proselytizing. Obviously, proselytizing devalues the faith of the other whereas Guru Nanak’s teachings stood for mutual love and respect. However, Guru Nanak’s acceptance of other faiths is critical acceptance as he seems well aware that passive acceptance would make all religions relative which would imply the first step towards an undifferentiated syncretism. A look at the dynamics of Guru Nanak’s social thought makes it clear that the religion founded by Guru Nanak is a way of life for the followers and a beacon of light for others to live a peaceful and meaningful life in a religiously plural society of today.

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3. Paul F. Knitter, Ed. *The Myth of Religious Superiority: A Multifaith Exploration* (New York: Orbis Books, 2005), Introduction, p. ix
4. The word ‘*malechh*’ literally means barbarian or uncivilized, an epithet normally used for foreign invaders just as the word ‘*firangi*’, originally used for a person of European origin but came to be used in a derogatory sense by the Indians when the British ruled over India.
5. The word ‘*kafir*’ has been used in the Quran in the sense of a non-believer, one who does not believe in one God. The relevant Surah 109 reads as follows: O unbelievers! I do not serve that which you serve/Nor do you serve Him whom I serve/Nor am I going to serve that which you serve/You shall have your religion and I shall have my religion. See M.H. Shakir, tr., *The Koran*, p. 422
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8. Ibid., pp. 42-43
9. *Varan Bhai Gurdas*, I:24
10. Akal Ustati, 85
11. *Varan Bhai Gurdas*, I: 33
12. Akal Ustati, 86
13. *Varan Bhai Gurdas*, I: 44; The *Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics* refers to another such instance relating to Shaikh Abdul Qadiri Gilani, a Sufi saint of the Qadiri tradition.
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