

THE SIKH SPIRIT AND THE GLOBAL SOCIETY

Keynote Speech

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We all know that this wide big world has today got transformed into a small global village as a result of the InfoTech revolution and development of fast means of transportation during the past hundred years or so. As a result, people of different races, religions and regions are now our next-door neighbors. Different faith-communities inter-penetrate and inter-act with one another. Gone are the days when people belonging to different racial, religious and cultural denominations lived in their own tiny, isolated camps, blissfully ignorant of whoever existed or what-ever happened outside.

As it is, we find this global world facing conflicts and violence raised in the name of religion by what we might call 'superpower imperium' and 'majoritarian imperium'. The former has manifested in the form of inter-civilization conflicts and the latter in targeting the religious minority in the name of homogeneity. The twentieth century, especially its latter half has seen the resurgence of religion as well as upsurge in religious fundamentalism, though both are related only to the extent of being contemporaneous. The modern western civilization with its 300-year-old history of commitment to secularism treats religious resurgence only as an umbrella term for religious intolerance, religious conflict and violence, and favors the rolling back of religious resurgence and reassertion of secularism. However, the solution to religious conflicts and violence lies not in the western-style secularism based on dichotomous worldview but in religious pluralism [Note # 1] becoming an essential component of the value system of our modern life. Religious resurgence is not to be confused with religious violence as the cure for religious violence may ultimately lie in a renewed appreciation for religion itself.

Coming back to the ground reality of our social existence, we find each faith-community over-zealous in under-rating the ideology and culture of the other. Leaders of each religion claim for their faith monopoly over truth. To them, only their religion, only their prophet can lead man on the path to God-realization and self-realization. Other religions are taken fake and other faith-communities as pagans. This exclusivist attitude is doing much damage to our social fabric, and this needs

to be rectified. We must realize that "the religious life of mankind from now on, if it is to be lived at all, will be lived in a context of religious pluralism.... This is true for all of us [16]. Therefore, the present situation should be the concern of all religions and religious leaders [14].

The Sikh faith is the youngest of major world religions, and being the youngest it can be called the latest stage in the evolution of the religious consciousness of man. It originated with Guru Nanak (1469-1539) in a north-west province of India but has since spread throughout the world despite the fact that it is not a missionary faith: the Sikh expansion is mainly because of the Sikh Diaspora, though dissemination of knowledge about the faith has also helped a little in this expansion. Chronologically, Sikhism originated in the fifteenth century, an era when medieval period was on its way out and giving place to what we now call the Renaissance Period. It was the time when certain irrational notions and concepts were being challenged: some scientists put up such a challenge in Europe and Guru Nanak challenged the wrong religious concepts and practices in the South East Asia. An in-depth study of the Sikh faith would reveal its critical attitude towards the medieval spirit and its responsiveness to modern problems and challenges, especially to the issue of religious pluralism.

Defining the true religion, the Sikh scripture says that the best of all religions is the one, which exhorts man to constantly remember God, and do noble deeds during his worldly existence [2]. Thus, the Sikh Gurus provide a new definition to religion keeping close to each other the esoteric and the exoteric streams of life. Religion becomes embedded in life as well as the basis of life. This blurs the boundaries between the sacred and the secular, rather recommends a dynamic interaction between the two. Herein the metaphysical serves as the *vis-a-tergo* of the social thought and behavior, spiritual becomes inspirational to the temporal, and the temporal makes the spiritual dynamic one. Man and the mundane world he lives in get spiritualized: the material world no more remains sinful or mere *maya* or just suffering, rather this manifest material world is called the dwelling-place of God [3].

The Sikh scripture calls this mundane world the *dharamsal* where *dharma* is to be practiced. The world is the creation of God, and in the world one finds the becoming of God in time. Man is not taken a born sinner, rather he is declared one with God, one in essence, thus giving place to the idea of spiritual unity and ethnic equality of mankind. God is one, and He reveals Himself (*qua* Word) to different holy men at different points of time. Thus, each revelation is genuine and each religion valid [5]. However, the feeling of *haumai* or egoism, which is the natural consequence of *avidya* or ignorance, makes man forgetful of his unity with God and other human beings, rather causes his differentiation from both. In the Sikh scripture, human life is declared the crown of all life – better than even that of gods who are said to yearn for human life [5]. It is called the best because it is the only opportunity for the individual soul to attempt and achieve oneness with the supreme Soul [6]: union with God can be realized while still living a robust and righteous life of filial and social obligations [7]. Thus, the world and the worldly life are declared wonderful and worth living. Doing noble deeds while still contemplating on the Name Divine is the Sikh ideal so as to transform this world into *Sach Khand*, a realm of Truth.

The Sikh faith integrates the world and worldly life with the idea of divinity. It rejects asceticism, but at the same time it is also highly critical of the hedonistic way of life. Asceticism and hedonism, as two extremes, are rejected, and the Sikh concept of social action is marked by boundaries of morality. The Khalsa, created by Guru Gobind Singh in fulfillment of Guru Nanak's mission, is the agency to which the task of social transformation has been endowed whereas the scripture renders the general framework of structure in which the task is to be accomplished. However, both the structure and the agency must function in harmony to bring about peace and co-existence, love and compassion, equality and justice in society [15].

Guru Nanak, the founder of the faith, after having had the revelation made long and wide spread odysseys to share his message: he never tried to impose on anybody the message of his revelation, rather he shared it with all. He is said to have taken four such preaching odysseys [Note # 2.] traveling throughout India and even some neighboring countries to share his message with mankind in general and the holy men of diverse religious traditions in particular. He made it a point to visit every place of pilgrimage that fell on his way and held discourses with the holy men there. The idea was to listen to them and then convey to them his own viewpoint. In one of his hymns also, Guru Nanak testifies to the importance of dialogue in inter-faith and inter-community

relations. Man must continue to maintain dialogue throughout his worldly existence because that is the only way at reaching the truth [8]. Even here priority is given to listening to the viewpoint of others.

Dialogue is recommended, but polemic is rejected [9]. Polemic causes - and is also caused by - ego which in the Sikh scripture is referred to as a "serious malady". On the other hand, humility, which is a necessary prerequisite for listening to the other's point of view, is the essence of all virtues [10]. Guru Nanak's "*Sidha Gosti*" as we find it included in the scripture, is a sort of spiritual dialogue between Guru Nanak and the *Siddhas* on the Sikh philosophy of life vis-à-vis the philosophy of yoga. Throughout the long-drawn dialogue, the serenity and sobriety is retained and the aim is to realize the truth. Guru Nanak is of the view that it is only through meaningful dialogue that truth can be arrived at. It is also this sort of attitude which modern mind must cultivate so as to resolve most of the socio-political and inter- and intra-community problems.

Another exclusivist point negated by the Sikh faith has been the denial of validity and authenticity of other traditions, their prophets and revelations. The exclusivists generally do so by comparing the ideal of one's own faith with the practices of others. Sikhism not only acknowledges and appreciates other faiths; it accepts their equal validity as well. This is like the twentieth century American poet and mystic, Walt Whitman, who accepted "a hundred, a thousand other Saviours and mediators and Bibles". This attitude helps us understand and appreciate other religions and live in harmony with other faith-communities. In one of his hymns Guru Amar Das [11] says:

*The world is burning in the fire of passion
Save it, O Lord, by Thy grace;
Save it the way Thou consider best.*

Moreover, exclusivist religions are by nature evangelizing: such a religion considers itself as the only valid and genuine tradition and wants people belonging to other traditions to join it. The very fact that Sikhism is not an evangelizing religion and that it exhorts Hindus to become true Hindus and Muslims to become true Muslims indicates the Sikh attitude of acceptance and tolerance towards other traditions.

The compilation of the Sikh scripture is another concrete example of the Sikh acceptance of religious pluralism. It can undoubtedly be called the unique scripture in its emphatic statement that revelation is neither religion-specific nor region-specific nor person-specific. It holds that revelation to different prophets in different spatio-

historico-cultural milieu was expressed by them in the language, idiom and metaphor that best suited them, and that the revelation in each case was genuine. It is in confirmation of this that Guru Arjan while compiling the scripture included in it hymns of several holy men coming from other traditions along with those of the Gurus. And, these holy men belong to different cast groups, different regions and belonged to different points of time. And, all the hymns in the scripture - may they be say of Guru Nanak or of Kabir or of Ravidas or of Farid - are held in equal reverence. However, there are certain points where the Gurus do not entirely agree with them, and at such points they retain what these holy men have to say but add to them their own comments so as to make their viewpoint clear.

In the Sikh tradition also we come across numerous instances in support of our contention. Guru Nanak was held in equal respect by Hindus as well as by Muslims. Emperor Jahangir himself acknowledges the fact of Guru Arjan gathering both Hindus and Muslims round him. Guru Arjan's invitation to Mian Mir, a known Muslim Sufi saint, to lay down the foundation stone of the Darbar Sahib, the sanctum sanctorum of the Sikhs now popularly known as the Golden Temple, is also indicative of the Guru's acceptance of the fact of high spiritual status a person of other religion could acquire. Guru Tegh Bhadur gave away his life for the sake of religious freedom of man. The Sikh Gurus condemned no religion or scripture, but were openly critical of the effete practices that had set in amongst them: neither the Vedas nor the *Qatebs* (the Semitic scriptures like the Bible and the Quran) are to be called false, rather false are those who do not reflect on them, says the Sikh scripture. Among the Sikhs, Bhai Kanahaiya is the best example of a Sikh seeing the same divine essence behind different religious denominations of the wounded soldiers in the battlefield at Anandpur. Treating all human beings as spiritually one and ethnically equal notwithstanding their different religious, cultural or racial backgrounds is the prerequisite for maintaining harmonious relationship between faith-communities.

The Sikh faith, no doubt, accepts plurality but this acceptance is not passive, rather it is critical. This critical spirit is quite explicit on a least two very vital points. The Sikh Gurus are highly critical of the sanctions and safeguards in any religious tradition for the hierarchical division of mankind. The idea of inequality by birth among people is not acceptable to them. There are many hymns in the scripture, which criticize the classification of humans into different *varnas* or castes. However, they do not condemn any of the scriptures - eastern or western: these scriptures are not false, rather false are those humans who do not contemplate upon and comprehend them, they assert [12]. In Sikh theology, all human are

equal notwithstanding all the differences in their exterior: all humans irrespective of their religious and cultural differences are, in essence, one with God and equal among themselves as well as in His eye. Talking about the creation of mankind, the scripture [12] says:

*God first created Light, and
then by His omnipotence made all the mortals;
From the One Light has welled up the entire universe
Then who is good and who bad? [12]*

Guru Gobind Singh reiterates the same idea in his *Akal Ustati* wherein he refers to the spiritual unity and ethnic equality of man in the following words:

*Some shave their heads
And sannyasins they become;
Others the style of yogis adopt;
Some vow to be celebrates,
And totally chaste they claim.
Some are Hindus and some Muslims,
To Shia or Sunni sects others belong.
Consider thou as one
The whole human race.*

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

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

many maladies of modern life.

The modern-day world suffers from the problems of mutual distrust and disharmony, oppression and violence, and if we have to set the world free from these and such other evils, we must “see others as our brothers and sisters, we need to discover how to affirm our own identity...without threatening the identity of others [15].” This happens to be the central message of the Sikh faith, which says that the idea of God’s love for all teaches us to accept and value the other in his or her otherness. It considers all religions and their revelations valid, appreciates others’ faiths but at the same time adopts dialogue to convey its differences on whatever points, makes love for God the *vis-a-tergo* of love for mankind and express this love through *seva* and such other philanthropic activities. The Sikh stress is on ethics of creative activism aiming at the realization of an ideal social structure of the Gurus’ vision – a structure wherein love and equality prevail, the otherness of the other and human dignity are respected, and oppression is replaced by justice mingled with compassion. But the need of the hour is that we must not limit ourselves to words alone, rather we must try and put them into practice and live the idea in our practical social life.

NOTES

1. For an understand detailed discussion on the concept and meaning of pluralism and other related terms (exclusivism and inclusivism), see Alan Race, *Christians and Religious Pluralism* (London, SCM), 1983. This phraseology was used by Alan Race for the first time and it has since been accepted and supported by almost all theologians including John Hick [*The Rainbow of Faiths*, London: SCM, 1985] and Gavi D’Costa [*New Blackfriars*].
2. Guru Nanak’s preaching odyssey to the southern parts of India took him through Karnataka, Maharashtra and Tamilnadu and up to Sri Lanka; in the east, he passed through Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Bengal, Assam and Orissa and went up to Dhaka in Bangladesh; in the west, he sojourned through Rajasthan, Gujrat and went deep into the Himalayas.

REFERENCES

1. AGGS = Aad Guru Granth Sahib. 1983 (reprint). Publishers: Shiromani Gurdwara Parbandhak Committee, Amritsar. (M = Mahla, i.e., succession number of the Sikh Gurus to the House of Nanak, M is replaced with the name of Bhagat/ Bhatt for their Bani, p = Page of the AGGS).
2. AGGS, M 5, p 266.
3. AGGS, M 2, p 463.
4. AGGS, M 3, p 853.
5. AGGS, Kabir, p 1159.
6. AGGS, M 9, p 220.
7. AGGS, M 5, 522.
8. AGGS, M 1, p 661.
9. AGGS, M 2 ?, p 1255. (Editor: M 1)
10. AGGS, M 1, p 470.
11. AGGS, M 3, p 853.
12. AGGS, Kabir, 1349.
13. Braybrooke, Marcus. 2001. Sikhism: A Religion for the Third Millenium”. in: *Perspectives on Sikhism*. Punjabi University, Patiala (p 15).
14. Knitter, Paul. 1995. *One Earth, Many Religions*. Orbis. New York (p 21).
15. N. Muthu Mohan, N. 2003. *Essential Postulates of Sikhism*. Punjabi University, Patiala p 128).
16. Smith, Wilfred Cantwell. 1962. *The Faith of Other Men*. Harper and Row. New York (p 11).