

BEING POLITICALLY CORRECT

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ABSTRACT

Political correctness is the 'in' thing these days. In interfaith discussions there is a tendency to portray one's own religion as tolerant, and in the process, just to be politically correct, to praise other faiths as equally valid and true as one's own, even when the faiths are in total disagreement. In the process of being tolerant and accommodating do we sometimes paint an incorrect picture of our own faith as well as of the other? This article is an attempt at pointing out some of the problems associated with such political correctness.

INTRODUCTION

For a Believer, one of the more difficult things to accept is the realization (whether right or wrong) that one or more parts of the infallible Scripture, or dogma, that the Believer subscribes to, does not sit well with common sense, or is actually at odds with what is proclaimed on behalf of the Scripture. That having been said, if, for example, when reading through some religious article by an expert one should perceive some 'defect' in the line of argument therein, what should one do? Would it really be wrong to question what your intellect sees as contradictions in the article or, if the article is right, sees them as contradictions in the Scripture? Would this amount to pride (in the most negative sense of the word) in what will surely be labeled by some as 'falsely perceived intellectual superiority'? Or should one be true to one's self, and continue to question the contradiction until one is given proof of the 'error' of one's perception?

In relation to the issue of respect and tolerance of other faiths, we often hear sentiments expressed in terms such as '*All religions are the same; they are just different paths to the same goal*', even though we know that the statements are not quite true. It is simply politically correct to say so. One is expected to look at all that is common in the various faiths and conveniently overlook the glaring differences: differences that give a lie to the politically correct statements. Should one just remain silent in these cases?

Over the years I have felt a sense of discomfort with some of the assertions in certain articles (my concern is only with articles on Sikhism), and have always steered clear of making public comment: so strong is my fear of causing any division within my already fragmented community and of inviting adverse publicity in the process.

DISCUSSION

With this introduction to my troubled mind, I can, perhaps, now draw attention to one article rather 'randomly' chosen (random in the sense that it happened to be the one I was reading when I found the courage, or stupidity, to embark on this risky venture of 'publicly' expressing my views). The article: *The Sikh Spirit and the Global Society* [5], which has been published in this very journal, *Understanding Sikhism, the Research Journal*.

The writer, Dr Dharam Singh, rightly observes that '*...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...Other religions are taken as fake...This exclusivist attitude is doing much damage to our social fabric, and this needs to be rectified*' [5]. Making the appropriate acknowledgements he then quotes two other writers and states that we must realize that our religious life '*...will be lived in a context of religious pluralism...*' and that '*...the present situation should be the concern of all religions and religious leaders*' [5].

There can be little or no argument with all this: it is the politically correct thing to say. We recognize that there will always be differences of opinions and beliefs. This is where respect and tolerance come into play. Respect and tolerance, however, do not mean that the message of all scriptures is entirely the same, or even that the general philosophical outlook of those scriptures is the same. It is not. Sure there are common exhortations to 'do good' or to remember (worship) God. When certain verses from a particular scripture are taken in isolation they may give the impression of being in agreement with some other scriptures, but when taken in the context of the whole stanza or chapter the meaning may not be quite the same.

Then there is the question of interpretation. Do we sometimes put more meaning into a verse than was originally intended? Is the translation/interpretation of one writer more valid or accurate than that of another? Again, these are questions that trouble me, and probably others too. That is the reason for Prof. Devinder Singh Chahal's declaration: *'The readers may find that interpretation of even the same verse from the AGGS by an author is different than that of the others. Since there is no unanimity on interpretation of some verses of the AGGS amongst the Sikh and non-Sikh scholars, therefore, the IUS neither approves nor disapproves any interpretation of any author'* [2].

With reference to the above mentioned article, on page 8 the writer states that *'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.'* It is further stated that *'Sikhism not only acknowledges and appreciates other faiths; it accepts their equal validity as well.'* It is one thing to *'...acknowledge and appreciate'* but quite another to accept *'...their equal validity as well'*. The reference given for the first quote from the Aad Guru Granth Sahib (AGGS) [1] is by Bhagat Kabir and reads as follows:

ਬਹੁ ਬਿਧਿ ਕਹਿਓ ਪੁਕਾਰਿ ਪੁਕਾਰਿ ॥

AGGS, Kabir, p 1159 [1].

This would, presumably, mean that the Scriptures of all religions that claim to be revelatory are genuine and that all those religions are valid. But in the case of every such religion, scholars from within and without the faith have pointed out to 'errors and contradictions' in the scriptures of those religions. Without getting into the 'errors and contradictions', but after reading about them, alarm bells are set off. Suddenly, "God's Word" does not seem infallible. The claims of Divine revelation quickly wear thin on applying simple common sense and reason. Yet, here is a quote from the AGGS which appears to say that *'...each revelation is genuine...'* I have a reasonable understanding of some of the major religions and/or their scriptures, and, as stated earlier, I am uncomfortable with assertions such as *'all religions are the same'* because these assertions do not ring true. Again, knowing what I do know of some of the other "revelations" I find it hard to accept that *'...each revelation is genuine...'* This prompted me to look up the relevant reference and check it out. At this point I must confess that I have no direct understanding of the verses in the original *Gurmukhi* and that I am dependant upon the translations of others. After carefully going through the relevant page 1159 of the AGGS I can only come up with the following verse as being the one Dr Dharam Singh alludes to:

ਬਹੁ ਬਿਧਿ ਕਹਿਓ ਪੁਕਾਰਿ ਪੁਕਾਰਿ ॥

AGGS, Kabir, p 1159.

This is translated by Manmohan Singh [6] as:
'I have in many ways proclaimed aloud and aloud this truth unto thee.'

Taken in isolation, and as it stands, there is no indication that the sentence can be interpreted as saying *'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.'* It requires some stretch of the imagination to interpret it as has been done in the article. Still, giving as wide a leeway as possible, it could, arguably, be accepted as one interpretation. Upon closer examination of the entire stanza, and taken in the context therein, it appears that Kabir is exhorting mankind to *'Worship God betimes'* [3], i.e. in good times, soon, early. An examination of the all the verses on page 1159 of the AGGS (the reference given in the article) do not reveal any suggestion of the assertion that *'...each revelation is genuine and each religion valid...'* or that *'God... reveals Himself... to different holy men at different points of time...'*

It is at this point that I face a dilemma: Should I just let things be, and forever retain this conflict in my mind, or should I point out the problem, as I see it, and risk inviting the wrath of many for even daring to question a learned, well-meaning individual?

'All religions are the same'

I now return to the phrase *'all religions are the same; they are just different paths to the same goal'*. Clearly this assertion has validity if we take it to mean that all religions are attempting to lead their followers to the one God, but that the methods are different. This would be fine, except that there are conflicts between the several methods; the paths are not merely divergent but in some cases they are diametrically opposite. These irreconcilable differences could be glossed over, or explained away somehow, if not for the fact they are, in each case, a part of Divine 'revelation' (Word of God), and the Divine, bearing in mind Its attributes according to Religion, cannot contradict Itself from one 'revelation' to another. Does this, therefore, mean that some revelation might not be revelation at all, or does the problem lie with the very word 'revelation' itself? (I hope to explore the issue of revelation at a later date.)

At this point I appear to have set myself up as asserting that neither is all revelation genuine nor are all religions valid. Has Dr Dharam Singh over-extended himself by interpreting Kabir's phrase on page 1159 of the AGGS the way he has? Has he asserted something that Kabir has not claimed? Evidently, he has not. On page 9 of the same article Dr Dharam Singh clearly states that the Sikh Gurus *'...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...' and gives the reference of Kabir from page 1349 of the AGGS which states:

ਬੇਦ ਕਤੇਬ ਕਹਰੁ ਮਤ ਤੁਠੇ, ਤੁਠਾ ਜੋ ਨ ਬਿਚਾਰੈ ॥

AGGS, Kabir, p 1349.

Dr Dharam Singh translates the above phrase as follows: '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...' So, to use his words, it appears that Kabir, in the AGGS, does say that all revelations (scriptures) are 'genuine and valid'. Should I now be foolhardy and dare ask: could Kabir have been wrong? Or should I simply avoid the issue and forever harbor the doubt in my mind? Could the problem actually be with our insistence on labeling scriptures as Divine Revelations? It is important for me to emphasize that my purpose in delving into these issues is to resolve the conflicts in my mind; I have to entertain the hope that, perhaps, some truly enlightened soul will be able to iron out my difficulty and put my mind to rest.

In my comments in relation to the 'Editorial Policy' of *Understanding Sikhism, the Research Journal*, I had, inter alia, considered the possibility of conflict between one verse of the AGGS and another, reminding the Editorial Board that '...Scholars of other scriptures have raised such issues - more so in this age of liberalism, science and technology. Such scholars have not all been anti-religion or from without the religion whose scripture is being scrutinized. It is a matter of time before even true-believing Sikhs similarly scrutinize the AGGS. The 'Journal' may therefore be faced with the uncomfortable task of explaining the apparent contradiction if it is brought to its notice. The Editorial Board of this 'Journal' has courageously decided to search for the truth. It is hoped that if and when the problems raised here arise the Board will not be found lacking in courage. That such a proposition will be divisive is a foregone conclusion. It is my fervent hope that the problem never arises' [4]. That was in 1999. Today, after delving deeper into religions, scriptures and dogmas, as well as into liberal literature, I find myself regularly confronted with doubt, or with contradictions, in the dogmas of every faith (mine included). I do not search out these contradictions but every so often I read something that does not resonate with my 'reason' and I find myself questioning the writer and myself.

Returning to Kabir, is it possible to interpret the verse *Bed Kateb kaho mat jhootha jo na bichare* differently? Could we have put in more than Kabir intended? Could Kabir be saying that 'do not (bother about) call(ing) the Vedas and Katebs false; it is the one who does not use discriminatory intellect (babaeek budhi)

that is false'? Put this way, it could mean that Kabir does not defend any scripture, and may well entertain the possibility of error in those scriptures, but that he puts the blame squarely on the one who reads the scripture without a discerning, critical mind, before accepting the validity or otherwise of that scripture or part thereof. That such an interpretation may be considered as implied from the following verse by Kabir:

ਕਹਤ ਕਬੀਰ ਭਲੇ ਅਸਵਰਾ

ਬੇਦ ਕਤੇਬ ਤੇ ਰਹਹਿ ਨਿਰਾਰਾ ॥

AGGS, Kabir, p 329.

This is translated by Manmohan Singh [7] as follows: 'Says Kabir, they are the good riders, who remain aloof from the Vedas and the Muslim religious books.'

The whole stanza stresses on the need to remain focused on the Divine by bridling one's mind, being self-reflective, and remaining secure in Divine knowledge (Divine love: Macauliffe's translation [3])

Thus, with *Bed Kateb kaho mat jhootha jo na bichare* interpreted in this way, it is possible to reconcile it with my contention that Kabir, as quoted on page 1159 of the AGGS, does **not** say that all 'revelations' are valid, which in turn can blend into my assertion that so different are the several 'revelations' that they cannot all be right, or revelations. (*Please see the Editorial Note at the end of the Paper also.*)

The next question prompted by the article is: Are Kabir's verses Divine revelations? All Sikhs will admit to their being so, especially as they are incorporated in the AGGS, and will admit, as Dr Dharam Singh says, that '...all the hymns in the scripture - may they be of say Guru Nanak or Kabir or Ravidas or Farid - are held in equal reverence.' So far there is little to cause dissent or controversy. Dr Dharam Singh then goes on to say: '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.' If this statement is true then saints such as Kabir, Ravidas or Farid, whose writings are incorporated in the AGGS, may, at best, be said to be 'Divinely inspired', but their writings cannot be Divine 'revelation', for the Divine by Its very attributes cannot admit to errors or corrections from age to age. Thus, taken to its logical conclusion, such an assertion will mean that not all parts of the scriptural corpus (AGGS) is Divine revelation, but that some parts of it are merely 'Divinely' inspired writings. That such an assertion is not entirely invalid may be gleaned from the contents of the *Bhatt Bani*, which are panegyrics, singing praises of the first five Sikh Gurus, and are yet incorporated in the AGGS. Surely the *Bhatt Bani* cannot be revelation: there are too

many pitfalls in so insisting.

This is where anyone so suggesting treads on dangerous grounds. It is at this point that the exhortation to apply *babaek budhi* (discriminating intellect), so often emphasized by Sikh theologians, is likely to be forgotten by one and all, and the person questioning the validity of revelation pilloried. It may well be that '*Dialogue is recommended, but polemic (controversy) is rejected*' or that '*polemic causes and is caused by ego*', a "*serious malady*" [5], but a meaningful dialogue is only possible if one is allowed to air one's views, however controversial or against the tide of tradition those views may appear to be. Humility is undeniably an admirable trait but it cannot be equated with the hypocritical situation wherein one accepts the traditional view simply because it is politically correct to do so, even though one has serious misgivings about that view. This, therefore, is actually an attempt at a meaningful dialogue, giving my view as rationally as is possible, and supporting my contentions with reason, ever mindful that '*Guru Nanak is of the view that it is only through meaningful dialogue that truth can be arrived at.*' [5].

CONCLUSIONS

It must be remembered that the faithful of every religion claim that every bit of their scripture is valid, as it is Divine revelation. Whilst some portions of each scripture will be in harmony with the scriptures of other claimants to Divine revelation, large portions will be not merely 'out-of-sync' but glaringly at odds with other scriptures. Clearly this cannot amount to 'every revelation being valid', not if the Divine really has all the attributes that we ascribe to it. If this assertion is true then one ought not to say all 'revelations' are true and valid just because it is politically correct to so say.

(Author's Note: I wish to make it clear that this article is not meant to cause any distress to, or disrespect for, Dr Dharam Singh, who is too well known a scholar of Sikhism, having done yeoman service in the interests of the Community. The choice of the article was, I re-emphasize, purely 'random' as explained above.)

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 the Bhagat/Bhatt for their Bani, p = Page of the AGGS).
2. Chahal, D. S. 2005. Fourth International IUS Seminar 2003, Philosophy and Teaching of Aad Guru Granth Sahib, Saturday, September 18, 2004. Preamble. Understanding Sikhism Res. J. 7 (1): p 6.
3. Macauliffe, Max Arthur. The Sikh Religion, Vols. V & VI. Publishers: Low Price Publications, Delhi. 1990 (reprint). P 261.
4. Sidhu, Sarjeet Singh. 1999. Editorial Policy of the Journal. Understanding Sikhism Res. J. 1 (2): 44.
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6. Singh, Manmohan. Sri Guru Granth Sahib (English & Punjabi Translation), Vol. 7. Publishers: Shiromani Gurdwara Parbandhak Committee, Amritsar, Second Edition 1982: p 3818.
7. Singh, Manmohan. Sri Guru Granth Sahib (English & Punjabi Translation), Vol. 2. Publishers: Shiromani Gurdwara Parbandhak Committee, Amritsar, Second Edition 1982: p 1100.

Editorial Note:

Dr Sidhu has raised very good question. It needs serious study to interpret Gurbani in its real perspective instead of interpreting to meet the political objectives. I would like to add here some phrases from Gurbani to support the idea of Dr Sidhu discussed in his article.

The following phrase of Bhagat Kabir does not support his phrase, ਬੇਦ ਕਤੰਬ ਕਹਹੁ ਮਤ ਝੂਠੇ, ਝੂਠਾ ਜੋ ਨ ਬਿਚਾਰੈ || AGGS, Kabir, p 1349, in his following verse: ਬੇਦ ਕੀ ਪੁੜੀ ਸਿਮ੍ਰਿਤਿ ਭਾਈ || ਸਾਂਕਲ ਜੇਵਰੀ ਲੈ ਹੈ ਆਈ || AGGS, Kabir, p 329 [1].

Kabir says: *The Simrity is the daughter of Veda (since its rules are based on Veda's philosophy). This (Simrity) has brought the chains and ropes of ritualism around the humanity (which have destroyed the humanity).*

Now the question is: Is Bhagat Kabir contradicting his own Bani revealed to him?

The following first phrase of Guru Nanak is also used by the Politically Correct Scholars to support the idea that Vedas are the truth (not false). But careful interpretation of second phrase will reveal the results just the opposite: ਚਾਰੇ ਵੇਦ ਹੋਏ ਸਚਿਆਰ || ਪੜਹਿ ਗੁਣਹਿ ਤਿਨ੍ਹ ਚਾਰ ਵੀਚਾਰ || AGGS, M 1, p 470.

The first phrase is as taught by Pundits and people accept it true. It is not a revealed phrase: *The four Vedas are the truth.* In the second phrase Guru Nanak explains that the Vedas cannot be called truth because: When one reads and deliberates on them then one finds four different doctrines. (If there are four different doctrines how can the Vedas be the truth?)

Finally at the end of this verse Guru Nanak advises as follows: ਭਉ ਭਗਤਿ ਕਰਿ ਨੌਜ਼ੁ ਸਦਾਏ || ਤਉ ਨਾਨਕ ਮੇਖਤਰੁ ਪਾਏ || ੨|| AGGS, M 1, p 470. *The real salvation comes when you understand Transcendent Entity and become humble and love the humanity.*

"If you are Hindu be a good Hindu and if you are a Muslim be a good Muslim", is another statement, which is very commonly used by many Politically Correct Scholars in these days. However, a careful examination of whole Bani of Guru Nanak does not support this statement anywhere in the AGGS. Therefore, the scrupulous Sikh scholars are invited to delve on this statement, which is often quoted in many articles in these days.

Devinder Singh Chahal
Editor