

# UNIQUENESS OF GURU NANAK'S PHILOSOPHY: REVELATION OR PHILOSOPHY?

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## ABSTRACT

*Guru Nanak's Philosophy is best gleaned from a study of his writings and from his actions such as can be ascertained to be true by historically verifiable documents. Guru Nanak took a comprehensive view of life: an approach best encapsulated in the aphorism "Kirt Karo, Naam Japo, Vand Shakko". This paper attempts to show why his philosophy is unique, especially given his practical, life-affirming approach in moulding ordinary individuals into good, productive members of society. Whilst open to the idea, if sufficient evidence is adduced, that there is every possibility that Guru Nanak's philosophy was totally new, and hence its uniqueness, it is suggested that no philosophy can be independent of existing philosophies. It is contended that the trend of interpreting Gurbani in Vedantic terms is wrong, and that many lay Sikhs seek to know what precisely Dhur ki Bani means and implies: an issue for Sikh theologians to sort.*

## INTRODUCTION

**T**his paper may well raise some issues which will cause some discomfort amongst those who would accept everything passed down by tradition even when it flies in the face of reason. But that is not the intention of the paper; it is intended to bring out into the open questions that must arise in the minds of many. As a consequence of traditional views and interpretations of scripture, in which the antiquity of the tradition is supposed to lend it unimpeachable credence, certain dogmas become elevated to the level of absolute truths and are rigidly enforced by the zealots of the faith. Any divergent view or practice is then seen by them as a distortion of the truth. The fact that this seminar is being held at Guru Nanak Dev University, and knowing that Guru Nanak himself encouraged the use of discriminatory intellect (*bibaek budhi*), one has cause to hope that every view will be intellectually discussed with emotions taking a back seat.

This Conference is set to deal with the uniqueness of Guru Nanak's philosophy as evinced from his writings, embodied in the Aad Guru Granth Sahib (AGGS) [1], as well as from his life story. I assume that most, if not all, speakers will delve on this. I will not, therefore, fixate on this, not the least reason being that I am not sufficiently, much less authoritatively, conversant with the scriptures. Before we enter into any discussion, let us first define the term 'Uniqueness' as used here in this article:

**Uniqueness:** Unique means '...being without a like or equal' [3]; something that is '...distinctively characteristic.' [3] It has to be kept in mind that it is possible for an idea or ideology to be unique without



necessarily being any good. This surely is not the uniqueness that the title implies, and therefore, the uniqueness, if any, must be good or at the very least neutral when compared to other faiths.

To say that Guru Nanak's philosophy is unique is to say that that his philosophy "...has distinctive characteristics, that there is no other [philosophy] like it and that it has no equal." However, the last portion of the... proposition, 'that it has no equal', is likely to be perceived as presumptuous, if not outright arrogant, and therefore not likely to sit well with non-Sikhs. A more toned-down proposition would be: "In key areas, [Guru Nanak's philosophy] is so distinctively different from other religions in its approach to Deity and Mankind, that it can justifiably lay claim to uniqueness without making claims of being **the only** answer." [6] This latter proposition is actually not just reasonable but the appropriate way to go.

To justify the claim of ‘uniqueness of Guru Nanak’s philosophy’ it has to be shown, through the verses in the AGGS [1], the key areas wherein the philosophy has distinctive characteristics when contrasted with other faiths, especially Hinduism and Islam, which were the predominant religions of Guru Nanak’s time.

Guru Nanak took a comprehensive view of life, of society and of the need of the individual to have a positive relationship with the Divine. Keeping in mind the historical fact that Indian society at that time was manacled by caste, and the ruling Muslim class considered all non-Muslims as subordinates, any attempt at rocking these false foundations was met with harsh criticism and treatment. But Guru Nanak was a charismatic religious teacher who took on the establishment by introducing simple, life-affirming principles. This approach is best encapsulated in the aphorism “*Kirt Karo, Naam Japo, Vand Shakko*” introduced by him and encouraged and emphasised by all the succeeding Gurus.

#### ***Kirt Karo, Naam Japo, Vand Shakko***

*Kirt Karo* or honest labour appears a simple and self-evident exhortation to the Sikhs, but it has deep-seated implications for society at large. The application of this principle necessitates that a Sikh has to act truthfully and to be honest in all his business dealings, and this, by necessary extension, means subscribing to good governance, transparency and even-handed treatment of all with whom one comes in contact during such dealings. This is a universal principle directed at all mankind and not just at Sikhs.

Having earned an honest living (wage), a person is expected to share (*Vand Shakko*) with his less fortunate fellow beings and with his Community. Aligned to this is the Sikh institution of “*Langar*” (more accurately “*Guru ka Langar*”), a Community kitchen or the Guru’s Refectory where all-comers are fed for free. At such kitchens Sikhs sit in *pangat* (row/s) without distinction of caste or social status to share a common meal prepared in the *langar*. This, now rather obviously simple idea has to be seen in the context of the history of the Punjab, and India in general during Guru Nanak’s time when people of certain (low) castes were not allowed to join the others in a meal. This belief in a caste-based social structure has profoundly affected Indian history and even today it presents significant challenges to modern development on that subcontinent. Guru Nanak broke these shackles of caste and social standing and he opposed established gender bias, thereby declaring the equality of all men and women.

This principle of sharing, *Vand Shakko*, is further demonstrated in the Sikh concept of “*Dasvandh*” (tithe) wherein every Sikh is expected to contribute at least one-

tenth of his honestly-earned income to help alleviate the sufferings of the needy or to contribute to any similarly worthy cause.

All this amounts to a significant demand of a good person, one that is not easily met, but one that in Guru Nanak’s philosophy is a necessary requirement of a just society; and even this is not quite enough: one is also expected to do *seva*, (serve). *Seva* means ‘Selfless Service’, i.e. serving the Community without prospect of recognition or expectation of reward. Many Sikhs do their *seva* by washing dishes, cleaning the floors, serving food, etc. in Gurdwaras. Whilst this is commendable, *seva* does not mean just that, and includes, as it does for many Sikh individuals and Organisations, performance of *seva* in hospitals, homes for the aged, provision of monthly rations to poor families, helping single mothers to fend for themselves and other such community services. It should, by now, be apparent to many that this will not be an easy maxim to adopt and fulfil. What sort of individual will be able to meet these requirements, totally or in part? The answer lies in “*Naam Japo*”.

The phrase is well known to all students of Sikhism. It calls for meditating on the Divine, on remembering God. Thus, it would be expected that a person whose mind is on God and His Goodness, will remain in equipoise, and will (should) thus be a peace-loving and useful citizen of society. This requirement of a Sikh ensures that such a person, with the love of God on his mind and ever remembering Him, will serve Him by being a good and productive citizen of civil society.

And so this simple sounding aphorism, “*Kirt Karo, Naam Japo, Vand Shakko*”, has a very profound effect on man in making him good:

ਕਰ ਕਰਿ ਟਹਲ ਰਸਨਾ ਗੁਣ ਗਾਵਉ ॥

ਚਰਨ ਠਾਕੁਰ ਕੈ ਮਾਰਗਿ ਧਾਵਉ ॥੧॥

ਭਲੇ ਸਮੇ ਸਿਮਰਨ ਕੀ ਬਰੀਆ ॥

ਸਿਮਰਤ ਨਾਮੁ ਭੈ ਪਾਰਿ ਉਤਰੀਆ ॥੧॥ ਰਹਾਉ ॥

*“With my hands I do His work; with my tongue I sing His Glorious Praises.*

*With my feet, I walk on the Path of my Lord and Master. I.*

*It is a good time, when I remember Him in meditation.*

*Meditating on the Naam, the Name of the Lord, I cross over the terrifying world-ocean. ||I||Pause||*

AGGS, M 5, p 189.

#### **Worldly Life**

During Guru Nanak’s time (15th – 16th Century) religious men (women were hardly considered) were expected to pursue their religious quests as ascetics, abandoning family and society but nevertheless living off it. Guru Nanak castigated those who took such an

approach and expected his followers to be just as religious whilst remaining householders and functioning as full, productive citizens of society. Such an approach, now taken for granted, when seen in the context of the time and the environs in which Guru Nanak promulgated his philosophy, was bold and far-sighted, even if one disputes its uniqueness.

Effectively, Guru Nanak:

- broke the chains of the established caste system (refusing the *janeu*, establishing *langar* in *pangat*), as well as treated women as equal partners in the worship and service of the Faith and the Community. Undeniably, Guru Nanak's philosophy is unique.

### Interpretation

In the past, and even now, much of Sikh scripture has been interpreted in Vedantic terms and ideas. Not the least of the reasons is that the verses are written using Vedantic terminology. But does this mean that the interpretation has to be in consonance with Vedantic ideology? If this were true then Sikh teachings / scriptures cannot really be unique. They can at best be modifications of existing ideology. This in essence is what Sikh writers like Devinder Singh Chahal [2] mean when they insist that Gurbani cannot be interpreted in Vedantic terms. Chahal says "*Guru Nanak promulgated a unique philosophy that is scientifically and logically very sound and thus has universal acceptability. His philosophy is termed as Nanakian Philosophy*". [2].

Given that Guru Nanak's audience at that time was mainly Hindu, conversant and familiar with Vedic teachings, the use of Vedantic terms and imagery must have been a necessary means for him to explicate his message to them. Indeed the writings of Guru Nanak when read in their entirety will confirm that the Guru was not making any Vedantic assertions; if anything he was preaching quite the contrary. Thus, the use of such terminology does not imply that the interpretation of these verses must be literal and in consonance with Vedic teachings. The persistence with which the Bani continues to be interpreted in Vedantic terms is, in my opinion, in large measure due to the fact that in the immediate post-Gurus period up till the early 20<sup>th</sup> Century our Gurdwaras were under the *mahants* who had introduced Hindu practices into the faith. The infamous *Faridkot Wala Teeka* (an exegesis on the AGGS) was the first such major work and it is entirely (so I am told) Vedantic in its interpretation; it continues to be used by so many preachers as the basis of their sermons. Such interpretations cannot ever appeal to reason, and no thinking person can countenance such interpretations and yet claim intellectual fidelity. [See Footnote 1].

### Philosophy vs. Revelation / Religion

From the start it is necessary to clarify two issues: What is

philosophy in contrast to religion/revelation, and whether Guru Nanak's philosophy is different from the philosophy of the other Gurus and that of the other contributors.

Without getting into any protracted debate about the varied definitions of religion/revelation and philosophy I will define the differences as are commonly understood by lay persons. Granted that both religion and philosophy have much in common and sometimes overlap, so much so we speak easily of "religious philosophies", likely because they often wrestle with the same questions, like the meaning and purpose of life, or of our origins, there are nevertheless clear differences which mark them as two separate systems.

The key differences between the two that are recognisable by most are:

Religions have rituals whilst philosophies do not.

Philosophy employs reason and critical thinking, promoting its ideas based on rational arguments; whilst religion relies on faith, sometimes exclusively, even if occasionally it too appeals to, or tries to appeal to, reason. Philosophers do not accept any authority but that of their own reason.

The word philosophy is of Greek origin, and means "*Love and pursuit of wisdom by intellectual means and moral self-discipline*" as well as "*Investigation of the nature, causes, or principles of reality, knowledge, or values, based on logical reasoning rather than empirical methods*" [8] (emphasis added).

The perception of lay persons is illustrated by the following, taken from a Pakistani forum [10]: A girl asked "*What do you think is Philosophy and Religion? and whats [sic] the difference between them or they just same*". The responses generally tended to be akin to this one: "*Source of religion is divine while the source of philosophy is the human brain*". And that in essence is how most people see the difference between the two: that Philosophy is the consequence of human reason and thus explains why philosophers do not accept any authority but that of their own reason, whilst revelation, for believers, involves a near dictation-like transmission of the message by Deity. This makes the two, revelation and philosophy, as alike as chalk and cheese. Even without elaboration, the discerning mind will begin to visualise the pitfalls of asserting either: whether Bani is philosophy or revelation. So is there a resolution to this conundrum?

### Revelation

All faiths refer to their own scriptures as God's Word or Divine Revelation; religion is based on revelation. What exactly does this mean or imply? A conveniently available definition/explanation, though it's in reference

to Christianity, applies to other faiths: “*Revelation is supernatural communication from God to man, either oral or written, though usually restricted to its written aspect, that is, to the whole contents of Holy Scripture... All Scripture is revelation...*” [9]

When assigning the label ‘Revelation’ to any writing it is important to remember what exactly it implies: “*A revelation is not something man could know on his own. It is not something man could arrive at by logically studying the facts.” [5]. It implies that revelation can only be made known by something beyond Man, and here religion posits God.*

This brings us to the next question that has to be resolved: whether Guru Nanak’s writings constitute a philosophy or revelation. Those who consider Sikhism to be a revealed religion often point to the following phrases:

ਜੈਸੀ ਮੈ ਆਵੈ ਖਸਮ ਕੀ ਬਾਣੀ ਤੈਸੜਾ ਕਰੀ ਗਿਆਨੁ ਵੇ ਲਾਲੇ ॥

*Jaise meh aave khasam ki bani taisra karun gyaan ve Laalo* which is translated as “*As the Word of the Lord comes to me so do I proclaim its knowledge, O Lalo!*” (AGGS, M 1,722 [1])

And

ਧੁਰ ਕੀ ਬਾਣੀ ਆਈ ॥ ਤਿਨਿ ਸਗਲੀ ਚਿੰਤ ਮਿਟਾਈ ॥

*The Bani of His Word emanated from the Primal Lord. It eradicates all anxiety.*

AGGS, M 5, p 628.

Like theologians of other faiths, Sikh scholars too claim that their Scripture is the real ‘revelation’ when compared to the scriptures of other faiths. Whilst this assertion may be simply made and accepted in the land of Sikhism’s origin, the fact that we now have sizable numbers of Sikhs resident in almost every country in the world, mere assertions may be insufficient. Sikhs of the Diaspora are continuously exposed to other faiths making similar claims and often participate in well-intentioned interfaith forums; to present their faith in its real perspective they need to know the relevant phrases and verses which show proof of Sikhism’s revelatory nature. It is therefore incumbent upon Sikh researchers and scholars to discuss this issue thoroughly, to analyse the verses so quoted and come up with the correct interpretations and unimpeachable evidence in order to convince the theologians and philosophers of the world about the above and other similar phrases so often quoted to justify the nature of Revelation.

### A SEPARATE STUDY OF GURU NANAK’S WRITINGS

A separate study of just Guru Nanak’s writings, as contained in the AGGS, Nanakian Philosophy as Prof Devinder Singh Chahal calls it, “is necessary to understand philosophy of Guru Nanak, embodied in his

Bani, to understand the rest of the Bani in AGGS” (D S Chahal). This allows, even if for purely academic purposes, the other writings, especially those extraneous to the AGGS, to be gauged. This does not *ipso facto* mean or imply that the writings of the other contributors to the AGGS constitute a different philosophy. It is as Daljeet Singh says: “*Guru Granth Sahib stresses that all the Gurus express a single unified thesis, representing the same spirit. Guru Gobind Singh has stated that they are all a unity, and express the same spiritual ideology*”. [7]

This means that the philosophy of the other Gurus, as incorporated in the AGGS, is *exactly* the same as Guru Nanak’s philosophy. The same has to hold true for the rest of the Banis, no matter who the contributors. It CANNOT be otherwise, not for a true believer, for to be otherwise will create a whole lot of secondary problems.

This study of just Guru Nanak’s writings has another use to it. Let us assume that after much deliberation / discussion of just these writings we finally reach an agreement as to what the philosophy is, and exactly how each verse written by Guru Nanak is to be interpreted. Once this is accepted any interpretation thereafter of all the other Banis, whether by the other Gurus or other contributors to the AGGS, will have to be in harmony with Guru Nanak’s philosophy. Again it cannot be otherwise. Should someone then interpret the non-Guru Nanak verses in any way that contradicts his philosophy, such interpretation can be identified as inaccurate, the error pointed out and he can reinterpret the verses, using the Guru Nanak’s philosophy as a touchstone.

But, and here I tread into dangerous territory, what if, after having understood Guru Nanak’s philosophy and having accepted the consensus / true interpretation, there is cause to find that some of the other writings contradict Guru Nanak’s philosophy? Members of the other faiths have had to face such dilemmas where one part of their scripture contradicts another and so on. Such contradictions have been found by scholars from within those faiths themselves, by true believers so to speak. What if we are faced with the same problem? Should we be afraid of this? Could this be the reason some believers object to studying Guru Nanak’s philosophy in isolation, and then attempting to make comparisons? If so, that would be a poor demonstration of faith and, worse, a serious fear of the truth, to the search of which all men of religion have committed their lives.

### SIKHISM: ORIGINAL OR SYNCRETISTIC?

Calling Sikhism a syncretistic religion has made Sikhs bristle, but the statement continues to pop up with annoying frequency. With some minor variations to the actual wording, these assertion, in general tend to say

*“Historians and specialists in Eastern religions generally believe that Sikhism is a syncretistic religion, originally related to the Bhakti movement within Hinduism and the Sufi branch of Islam, to which many independent beliefs and practices were added.”* [Footnote 2 a]

In essence they imply that Guru Nanak’s philosophy was not original, that *“Nanak attempted to integrate the best in Hinduism and Islam into a new inclusive religion”* [Footnote 2 b]

No philosophy can be entirely independent of existing philosophies. One is almost always influenced to some degree by what one is exposed to. Thus Guru Nanak will definitely have been affected by the prevailing religious philosophies, the main two being Hinduism and Islam. But is that enough to label Sikhism (Guru Nanak’s philosophy) syncretistic?

It is suggested that when Guru Nanak, after his mystical experience, went on to speak and write about spiritual matters he was obliged to use the language that the people were familiar with and the terminology that was well known to them: that of Hinduism and Islam. The use of such terminology, coupled with the fact that Hinduism and Islam were the two main religions of the region, may have led some scholars to erroneously label Sikhism as syncretistic. A dispassionate, objective review of any religion will show that each was influenced by and built upon the foundations of others which were known to its founder. And yet no one refers to them as syncretistic? Why? Because, as has been stated above, when in key areas, a religion (philosophy) becomes so distinctively different from other religions, in its approach to Deity and Mankind, it can justifiably lay claim to uniqueness, and to a separate identity. Such is the case with Sikhism.

Such building-up on or being influenced by existing scripture is evident even in the three Abrahamic faiths, the Judaeo-Christian-Islamic traditions. Islam, for example, recognises the Old Testament prophets, as well as the central figure of the New Testament, Jesus, as its own. This does not make it a syncretistic religion. There is, of course, the difference that in the case of Islam it simply says that it is the final, correct revelation which its two predecessors also received but which was allowed to become corrupted or lost. Such claim may not fall into the syncretistic trap, but it does open up a whole set of other problems associated with claims of revelation.

Having said that a philosopher is influenced by his environs and his exposure to other philosophies, one other question remains: Did Guru Nanak undertake a conscious effort to devise the modifications according to his intellect, or did he write those verses under some divine influence, almost as an automaton? The answer to that can perhaps

be derived from the two phrases quoted above (*Jaise meh aave khasam ki bani taisra karun gyaan ve Laalo and Dhur ki Bani aayee...*). Whilst acknowledging that they are not word-for-word dictations, these phrases clearly show that the Guru was compelled to utter (write) them following his mystical experience, almost like a Divine command. It was not a conscious effort to force any modification so as to integrate the best in Hinduism and Islam into a new inclusive religion.

In the case of Guru Nanak’s philosophy there is still another possibility: this could be an entirely new philosophy, independent of the old ones, one which may give a superficial appearance of having been, in some areas, built upon the old, but with new meanings so far removed from the old as to be new. Guru Nanak was an astute observer of Nature; could he have been a Natural Philosopher? [Footnote 3] He was a contemporary of Galileo Galilei, a Natural Philosopher, who said *“Philosophy is written in this grand book, the universe, which stands continually open to our gaze. But the book cannot be understood unless one first learns to comprehend the language and read the letters in which it is composed...”* [4] Galileo was of course referring to mathematics as the language. But could Guru Nanak, amazed by the awesomeness of the universe, and attributing it all to God, have incorporated his mystical experience into this new philosophy?

This, however, is an area that can only be explored by those who have a deep understanding of the AGGS, an equally deep understanding of Hindu and Islamic scriptures, and of Natural Philosophy. That, unfortunately, is not my strength and so I must pass on drawing any conclusions regarding the issue of a totally new philosophy, even if I have raised the possibility.

## CONCLUSIONS

Having markedly different aspects to it, Guru Nanak’s philosophy is definitely unique when compared with other religious philosophies. Calling it a philosophy does not necessarily obviate the influence of the Divine on the writings: they were uttered on God’s command.

Sikhism is not a syncretistic faith and Guru Nanak did not attempt to integrate the best of Hinduism and Islam to found a new religion. In key areas, Sikhism is substantially and critically different from the others and stands out as a separate religious philosophy.

## Footnotes

I am dependant on the views of others, those familiar with the AGGS, when expressing such sentiments. Where possible, I have taken it upon myself to check out the verses and with the help of translations verified those views. They make sense. The

*(Continued on page 84)*

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same process when employed on the quoted verses using Vedantic interpretations make logically unacceptable reading.

Sources of quotes on Syncretistic Religion:

<http://www.indiaprofile.com/religion-culture/sikhism.htm>

[http://urantiabook.org/archive/readers/601\\_sikhism.htm](http://urantiabook.org/archive/readers/601_sikhism.htm)

Natural Philosophy is a term applied to the study of nature and the physical universe that was dominant before the development of modern science; it involves the study of nature in all its various dimensions

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