

Universal Faith of
GURU NANAK

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The life of Guru Nanak in this world was a gospel of freedom, of enlightening wisdom, revealing music, inspiring poetry, and undying love for the eternal Spirit which he saw in all its manifestations in the human world. In his life, which has not been so far adequately written, and in his writings which have not as yet been deeply and profoundly probed, there ever lives the unveiled image of Guru Nanak, as he really was in history, an image which is quite different from the one so far presented by our historians and theologians. For that very reason, the image of Sikhism and its role in the political and cultural history of our country, and its deeper currents that have streamed into every land and country on earth, have also remained undefined, blurred and confused in the non-Sikh world.

The birth of Sikhism as a Universal Religion is a well marked and decisive episode in the evolution of religious consciousness, yet, like every other movement of the human spirit, Sikhism emerged as a fountain of New Faith from the dynamic personality of Guru Nanak, a prophet of singularly unique personal *charisma* and genius. Guru Nanak conveyed his message of transfiguring man and transforming society in the universal language of religions, artistically adorned in music and poetry. Wherever he went he inspired people to accept the eternal truth revealed to him in his inborn knowledge and experiences.

Guru Nanak asked men of all countries, nationalities and religious cultures "to think universally, to consider themselves as elements of humanity as a whole," and it appears now that he tried to rouse world consciousness, a thousand years ahead of his times. Wherever he went he widened the mental horizon of the people, enlarged their vision, softened their hearts, and deepened their spirituality. Travelling on foot, on horseback,

or by boats and ships, Guru Nanak went to the inaccessible Himalayas, impenetratable and even hostile neighbouring countries, and tried to bring about single-handed a true cosmic evolution.

He gave articulate utterance to the needs and aspirations of man, the citizen of the world. He gave a message for civilizations and cultures to come. This fearless, lone prophet arose from the ranks of the people like a commanding figure and addressed people from the pulpits of Benaras, Buddha-Gaya, Mecca, Medina, Baghdad and Jerusalem.¹ His spiritual influence seemed to pass over people widely separated in space. In every country and region he visited, fresh spiritual impulses broke into life with far-reaching consequences.

The soul and spirit of Guru Nanak's message was to purify and ennoble the religious consciousness of humanity by infusing into it a new ethical Spirit. He protested against the sensuous, impure, and fanatic conceptions of religion, and denounced the exaggerated importance attached to religious ceremonies and age old rites of the tribal period of religious history. He did not see any virtue in mere antiquity. Indian culture and civilization was perishing under his very feet, because it was too much burdened with the past. As it was not prepared to accept what was new, it was showing signs of perishing of atrophy. Guru Nanak insisted on devotion to what is undying, what is lasting and inspiring in world thought. Thus in every holy place he visited, in every seminary and philosophical and theological centre he came across, he opened a dialogue of communion with truth, and through his creative spirit, he liberated new ideas and aspirations and bathed all old concepts like *ziker* (dhikr), *yoga*, charity, *sunya*, *Shabad*, *shakti*, *tariqat*, *ma-arfat*, mind, self, in new light, and gave them new philosophical contents. He, however centralised his own philosophy and mysticism by giving it concrete institutional organisations in the spirit of Universal religions. As Sikhism was not a personal religion interested in the salvation of the individual, but

1. Historical records reveals that Guru Nanak went as far as Turkey.

a brotherhood based on kinship of enlightenment of truth, institutions like the church, baptism were absolutely necessary. Yet the Guru built the Sikh Church without a Pope, priests or liturgy. They introduced worship of the Word of God without meaningless rites. The Sikh Church always has been and shall ever remain so, a spiritual and congregational union of those who professed faith in the teachings of the Gurus and freely accepted obligations to follow God in the light of their Wisdom and revelation. Not by ties of blood or by the right of citizenship are men made members of the Sikh Church, but by the presence in them of a religious spirit and by their self-dedication to spiritual ends.¹

In his writings Guru Nanak declared that the true and perfect Church (Harimandir : Temple of God) is never a present fact but an ideal to be realised. A person or a religious community which separates itself entirely from religious institutions and organised discipline is prone to decline to a lower level of interests to be led captive and degenerate under the tyranny of secular things. Kabirpanthis, Dadupanthis, Ramanandis and Sufis have faded out of history because of lack of essential institutions to hold them together in social and cultural unity.

When religion becomes a tyranny of sheer observances, of rites and ceremonies it can be saved from decay and death by a new and powerful uprising of the ethical spirit, which breaks the dominance of priestly class, the fanaticism of dogmas, and proclaims the freedom of faith. The commanding figure of Guru Nanak did not step up on the stage divorced from all connections with what had gone before. He founded a religion through which he established positive relations with

"Sikhism is not simply two old religions made one; it is, rather a genuinely fresh start. Its followers believe it to have been authenticated by a new divine revelation to the Founder, Nanak. . . It is thus evident that the religion of the Sikhs is not to be confused with the rationalistic syncretisms whose adherents have been engaged in a reworking of a philosophy rather than in a revival of religion, properly conceived.

existing religions. There was a unique and inexplicable element in the depth of his personality. He transcended the ancient limit and proved that divine knowledge and spiritual experience was not the monopoly of any pundit, class or caste. He made Sikhism missionary in activity and universal in its claims.

In moving forward to this large and enlightened outlook of Universal Religious, Guru Nanak moved away from the limitations of traditional religions. God or *dharma* was not the monopoly of one country, nation, community or creed. In God there was no East and West and the worship of God could not be restricted to any single church or system. By making religion more personal and inward and changing it from abstract speculation to an indispensable essence of social function, Guru Nanak made it more universal. It is the imperishable glory of Guru Nanak that out of the wrecks of traditional religions, fanatic creeds, mystifying dogmas, sterile metaphysical systems, he gave to posterity a living philosophy and a universal religion. In an age when religions were fighting a battle of survival and extinction, and when persons from other religions were considered pagans, heretics, heathens, *kafirs* and *malechas*, Guru Nanak realized in all its fullness the idea of a universal religion and throughout his writings the fundamental theme is that true religion is in all places where men worship in spirit and in truth. Thus in Sikhism revelation of Truth is not a past event. It is that which continues to be. It is possible for all men and not for the privileged few to realise truth in its fullness.

The religion of Guru Nanak calls for active exercise of the will. It urges men to overcome the world by the power of Spirit and through the illumination of divine knowledge and of purified affections to make the things of the earth, the stepping stones by which the soul mounts upwards to the super-mundane goals. The wisdom and compassion of Guru Nanak is inspired by the consciousness of the infinite worth of men and women who are the children of God, and by the desire

to lift them upwards to the consummate fellowship with Him. For that reason his message was not to flee the world but to avoid being entangled and led captive by purely worldly interests.

In his search and revelation of Ultimate Reality, Guru Nanak was fundamentally concerned with eternally living and perceptible Truth; not the epistemological truth or the theological truth of a creed, but the truth of man's being, the truth of eternal Being in all its manifest and unmanifest forms. He was, in a word, fundamentally concerned with the search for the meaning of life, and according to him, human life is the only opportunity to know the purpose and meaning of life.¹ By knocking at the doors of all theological seminaries, *khanqas*, and *ashramas* Guru Nanak broke through the veto on theological discussions, such as is still found in Barthian theology, Islamic theology, and Catholic theology. He kept Sikhism free from all such veto. When the *hajjis* and *pirs* of Mecca confronted Guru Nanak with their belief that: "Mohammed was the last prophet?" and asked him, "Where was the necessity of God sending another messenger like him, more so to Mecca, the House of God?" Guru Nanak replied, "If you Muslims of Mecca had been living according to the true and noble teachings of prophet Mohammed, God might not have sent me here or to the world. I have come because you have drifted away from the truths revealed by the prophet."²

The beatitudes of life which Guru Nanak imparted to his disciples are the common heritage of divine man all over the world, and all religions have seriously taken most of them, and some of them have erred only in taking the ideals to dangerous extremes. Besides rights, position, career and riches, man's greatest treasure is his *Self*, his being, his soul. Without being captivated by economic interest and earthly longing, the self of man has to be ennobled till it becomes superior to historical and cultural circumstances. From the treasures of their

1. Rahiras:

2. Meccadi Gosht

inner being inspired men give many things to poor-wealthy people. These inspired men are free from the captivating enchantment of riches which kill the soul and harden the heart.

“Enlightened Sikhs”, says Bhai Gurdas, “have power and yet in their strength they are tender, docile and compassionately submissive. They have their pride, dignity, honour, but without any self-conceit, haughtiness and selfishness. Their strength and power, their pride and consciousness of their integrity are imbued with the spirit of humility, love, and compassion.”¹

And yet the Sikh Gurus realized more than anyone else that all the problems of life cannot be solved through love, compassion and non-resistance to tyranny, evil and despotism. Non-resistance of evil may be necessary where resistance is impossible, and even then the fearlessness of a martyr alone can save the situation and awaken the conscience of brute forces. But when non-resistance is made the absolute philosophy of life, we know from our own history what are the tragic results. When this philosophy of non-resistance to evil was carried to extreme in social and political life, the teeming millions of Hindu-Buddhist India became helpless victims of degrading aggression and centuries of slavery and oppression. The Sikh Gurus always admired superior and sublime spirituality but they condemned such stupid passivity which accepted abject submission and slavery as the ultimate fate and inevitable result of non-violence and passive resistance. By laying down their lives for the cause of freedom of worship and freedom of belief, the fifth and ninth Gurus, Guru Arjan and Guru Tegh Bahadur, set an unprecedented and glorious example of non-resistance to tyranny, but they asked their successors to protect the innocent masses, their freedom and culture with the sword. They glorified peace which is the fruit of strong, patient, prudent goodwill, but they never accepted the peace and order which is the fruit of aggression and violent despotism. That is why the Sikh Gurus taught and trained the Sikhs to

1. Bhai Gurdas : Var 12: 3; 32: 1,2

hold the sword in one hand and the palm-branch in the other. They wedded the spirituality of the soul, with the sovereignty of freedom to think, worship and live. They taught their disciples to love righteousness and to suffer for it. They would lose all such things as high offices, riches, mansions, and material possessions, rather than compromise with the forces of violence oppression, and accept injustice for the weak and oppressed, least of all for themselves. Whenever responsible Sikh leaders have not done this, and have surrendered the rights of their people for personal gains they have dishonoured themselves in the eyes of people, and in the pages of Sikh history, whatever their personal gains might be.

The first commandment of the Gurus is that Sikhs are not supposed to avoid wrong for fear of punishment, nor do good for the sake of reward. This would be a low standard of morality. We have to assert the moral order in spite of physical laws and brutality and we have to believe that our losses do not deprive us of life in truth and eternity. Amidst physical misfortunes and cruelties we have to be conscious of the fact that we carry an immense treasure and immortal spirit within ourselves. Our feelings and sufferings are mere fragments of stone in the structure of the world. God's ways are divine, and we should not be astonished that the divine is not exactly as human.

Though my body be crippled with disease.

Though the relentless stars bring endless misfortune
on me,

Though bloody tyrants fill my soul with terror,

Though all these miseries be at once heaped on my
head,

Even then, my Lord, I shall praise Thee:

And I shall not grow weary of exalting Thy Holy
Name.

Guru Nanak : *Majh ki Var*, pp. 142

The yoke of suffering weighs on men from the day they leave their mother's womb till the day they return

to the mother of all. Innumerable physical evils are the portion of every creature. When we see the wicked prosper there appears to be some miscarriage of divine justice. Many pious men suffer all their life, and many wicked people remain fortunate to the very day of their death. But says Guru Nanak :

Were a man to live for ages four,
Or even longer, ten times more;
Though his reputation spreads over the nine shores.
Though the whole world was his subject,
And he were universally well known,
Yet, lacking grace of God, in God's presence
Such a man would be disowned.
Such a man would merely be a worm among
vermins,
And his sins will be laid at his door.

Guru Nanak : *Japji*, pp. 6

No man is sinless, not even a saint. By enduring trials man is cleansed spiritually. A misfortune may be a useful reprimand. Sorrow is not a punishment; it may be chastisement. It is also sent by God as an opportunity for man to overcome himself and triumph over self-love. A man may be enjoying God's love even when straightened by misfortune. Man-made suffering through exploitation, cheating, and oppression are not to be taken passively, but man should have the courage to suffer in fighting against them. A heroic act of confidence in God and ultimate victory of Truth will tide over the dark hours.

Lord, when I am happy, I shall worship Thee only.
When I suffer, I shall not forget Thee;
Though Thou shouldst cause me to hunger
I should live like a man full fed;
Through my suffering I should feel joy of Thy
presence.

For Thee I would tear this sentient frame to pieces.
And let it be devoured by flames.
For Thee, I would live as the humblest servant.

Adi Granth N IV. *Suhi* pp. 575

At death the transitory suffering of the just is transformed into eternal joy. This consoling truth, frequently forgotten in time of affliction is particularly true of those who suffer and die for noble causes. Even before facing death they feel their heart and soul is close to eternal beatitude. During the time of struggle our human nature revolts against the pending storm. When we brave the storm and it blows over our head, causing some physical injury, we enjoy the peace and sunshine of inner illumination that follows.

The temptations which cloud the vision of man and obstruct his search for Light are the same all over the world. They centre around five temptations: *kama* (lust), *krodha* (wrath), *lobha* (greed), *moha* (attachment), and *ahamkara* (vanity of self-sense). Much darkness and difficulties that beset life, all strife and incomprehensibility we have to face in our upward journey is due to these five temptations. Body by nature is not sinful, but man the dweller in this clay house whose foundations rest on dust is so frail that he is easily overcome by temptations:

This God-built house of the body,
Of which the soul is a tenant has many doors;
The five temptations that the flesh is heir to,
Make daily raids upon it;
Whilst the soul disports itself in delights of senses,
Thinking the house lent for a season
Shall last for ever.

Guru Nanak : *Rag Gauri*, pp. 155

The sons and daughters of our age living in unhealthy atmosphere full of degrading allurements are victims of exaggerated sexuality and their outlook is tainted. Their life resemble more and more that of inferior animal world. Instead of seeking sunshine and fresh air for the souls they rush to stinking slums of immorality. Even art and literature instead of asserting discipline and immorality confounds this ugly chaos with doctrinal hatred, neurasthenic intoxication of materialistic ideologies, and excite the immature minds to tear to pieces

the flowers of love, beauty, and tender virtues of life. Even ties between the old and the young, between the teacher and student are loosened and the roots of the strength of humanity rots. The barbarity of our political and social thinking consumes life in its blossom.

Lust and wrath waste the body,
As borax melts the gold,
But the gold that can stand the test of fire,
Is valued highly by the goldsmith;
So it is with the souls.
Man is an animal
And egoism is the butcher;
In the Hands of the Creator
Is the saving grace.

Guru Nanak : *Ramkali*, pp. 931

In the soul of man the Spirit and Light of God is revealed through the Word Divine. When the Guru illumines the heart with his Word, our being throbs with the pulse of stronger, more realistic and glorious life. It is this pulse and surge of finer and more spiritual consciousness that we need more and more. The Guru, the bestower of Light inspires in us His Wisdom and we enter the path of divine life. Our life grows in the Spirit of His Being and blossoms forth into the most fragrant flowers of His Wisdom. Our soul catches the touch of God.

The philosophy and mysticism of the Word of God, which we call *shabad* in Indian languages, *dabar* in Hebrew, *kalam* in Arabic, and *logos* in Greek, is the common heritage of all universal faiths and higher religions. Says the Bible and *Adi Granth*: "God willed to create Light and there was Light. God's Will and Word became creative action.¹ This Truth constantly recurs in some schools of Yoga, Tantra² and even in

1. Genesis 1; 3.

aval Allah nur upaya, kudrat de sabh bande: Adi Granth p . .

2. *Garland of Letters* by Sir John Woodroffe, see chapter on Eternity of Shabda.

some Upanishads. It is found in the writings of the Sufis.¹

The Word of God is a power which manifests itself in creation, in His Wisdom and in His grace. It is the omnipotent fire that shatters the rocks of ignorance. Even when human words are supposed to move mountains they have no ontological existence, but this Cosmic or Divine Word is a testimony of His Being and of Truth. Philo sought to correlate the Old Testament concept of the Word with that of Plato on ideas, and of Stoics on the Logos. Unlike Philo the Sikh Gurus considered the Word as subsistent. The Sikh Gurus described their spiritual personality as the Word (shabad) made flesh, and did not attach much importance to their physical personality. The Word of God is a term denoting God's Will and Power, but the Name of God denotes the unveiled Presence of God. As in some passages of old Testament, and the Koran, the word Name is equated with God Himself.

When the *Siddha Yogis* of the Himalayan retreat asked Guru Nanak: "What is the source of thy knowledge? To what period belongeth thy philosophic system? Who is your Guru?" Guru Nanak replied:

With the beginning of breath of life,
My philosophical system began also;
Its source is the Wisdom of the True Guru,
The true Guru is the divine Word,
And the human mind is the disciple.
What keepeth me in my detachment,
Is meditating on the Ungraspable one.
Through the One Divine Word,
God is made real to us,
And the seekers of Truth destroy the flames
Of attachment to the little self.

Guru Nanak: *Siddha Gosht*: 44

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1. Since thou canst not bear the universal Light, drink the Word of Wisdom,
for its light is veiled,
To the end that thou mayst become able to receive the Light,
and behold without veils that which now is hidden.
And traverse the sky like a star; nay, journey unconditioned without a sky.
Rumi: *Poet and Mystic* tr: Nicholson p 189.

In another place Guru Nanak says:

Without the Guru to teach us, we walk in darkness,
Without the Word we have no understanding,
The Word of the Guru is the Light,
His Word's Light leads to the Truth,
There, Death has no existence.
His light is joined with eternal Light.

Guru Nanak: *Sri Rag*, pp. 55

In every word Guru Nanak has written, and in every message of his historical sermons, Guru Nanak beckons us to approach God like a man who with the enthusiasm of an artist strives to express in his own soul that which he perceived to be beautiful and good. He does not address the Punjabis, the natives of his homeland; he does not address the Hindustanis (Indians), his countrymen; he addresses the Universal Man in the present tense of God. He gives a call for the quest of God in the fullness of existence, and world-being. His Word is the philosopher's stone which transmutes all baser elements, all degraded and fallen souls, and makes them living altars from which the fragrance of incense of true religion and true worship would arise in perfumed clouds. Never in her short history of four or five hundred years have the Sikh Panth ever had a more urgent call and nobler opportunity to fulfil her obligations handed down as a moral and spiritual legacy by Guru Nanak—Guru Gobind Singh. The true spirit of Sikhism has remained depressed beneath the burden of secular interests for quite a long time. This is the opportunity for it to reassert itself not merely in narrow geographical limits but on the moral and spiritual forum of world-stage.
