Guru Nanak’s Vision of Religious Humanism

— Attar Singh

It is quite and even meaningfully remarkable that the Sikh tradition’s own internal perspective on the emergence and evolution in history of the Sikh faith should have attracted only scant consideration as against all sorts of controversies over the external alternatives to the former. Grouped whether on the basis of their categorisation of the structural features of Sikhism as additive, syncretic or eclectic on the one hand,¹ and schismatic on the other², or according to the emphasis on, “the features which Sikhism so patently shares with other religious traditions in India”, as either of Hindu³ or Islamic⁴ origin and orientation in its responses to the human condition and the mystical and moral quest of man all these approaches are agreed in one thing; they all are equally if ever so subtly and non-chalantly reluctant to admit Sikhism’s claims to any organic integrity. It should, of course, be quite interesting indeed to define and examine the ideological predilections of the protagonists of these different approaches to Sikhism. However, for the limited purpose of the present Seminar, the exercise may prove to be much of a scholastic, even intellectual luxury. Suffice it to say that the insights made available by the alternative perspectives, though not altogether unwelcome, can become meaningful only if these could be made to reconcile and cohere with some self-dependent frame of reference. For this, a fall back upon the Sikh tradition, to say the least, is unavoidable.

As a point of departure, it will be helpful to start with the line of argument developed by Kenneth W. Jones⁵ to emphasise the differentiation in the religious situation of Punjab in the context of the emergence of Sikhism, defined by him as a prophetic religion which begins, according to him, out of a parent religion whether evolutionary or prophetic, “with a Prophet and his message” and which, if successful, gradually splits off from the parent religion and ultimately develops a separate set of ritual and sense of identity of its own and derives authority from a new text or texts. The membership of a prophetic faith is not ascriptive, that is by birth, but by conversion through proselytisation. The evolutionary religions, in which category Kenneth W. Jones places Hinduism both by itself and as the parent religion alike of Sikhism, Buddhism and Jainism, are characterised as those systems of belief which have no definite beginning in time, have no founding Prophets and grow with the social and cultural systems of a particular people.

To this quite practical and useful differentiation especially between Sikhism and Hinduism which draws pointed attention to the distinct identity of the former, one may also add another
dimension: that of religious and historical configuration in which Sikhism stood vis-a-vis its parent faith: Hinduism and the alien, even though another prophetic religion: Islam, As a matter of fact that latter element of configuration is of far greater import because it projects the individual identity of Sikhism in a still sharper focus. Moreover, as against other similar, though not quite identical, movements in medieval India of Bhakti and sants cults within Hinduism and Sufism in Islam it is Sikhism alone which instead of seeking accommodation either within its parent religion, i.e., Hinduism, or within the conquering faith, i.e., Islam, chose to protest against both of them, revolt against the former and confront the latter. It is in this revolutionary configuration of protest, revolt and confrontation that the inner urges and aspirations of Sikhism sought and achieved their basic articulation not only mystically and metaphysically but even historically.

The first ever interpretation of Sikhism from within the faith was undertaken by no less a person than Bhai Gurdas, whose works were canonised by the fifth Guru Arjun Dev, as the “key of the Guru Granth”. While developing the social and religious background to the sacred ministry of Guru Nanak in Var I, Bhai Gurdas gives a lucid account of the inter-religious rivalries and conflicts between Hinduism and Islam, religious persecution of non-Muslims by the theocratic State, and sectarian fragmentation and atomisation of the Indian society. His allusions to the alienation of man from an authoritarian State structure and corrupt and perverse religious practices carry a deep imprint of Guru Nanak’s own observations. In a way, the ideological position attributed to Guru Nanak by Bhai Gurdas posits the idea of judging man not by his avowed faith but by his actions. When Guru Nanak is questioned by the Qazis and Mullahs during his visit to Mecca as to the comparative merits of Hinduism and Islam, he replies that both are doomed for their neglect of truthful actions.

The Janam Sakhis, even though greatly discounted by some of the scholars as dependable historical evidence have the undisputed merit of concretising through narratives and illustrations the inner core of the Sikh position on the conflict between the outer forms and the inner content of both the great faiths. In a more direct and vigorous manner, Guru Gobind Singh, in the preface to Bachitra Natak”, assimilated the element of the Sikh configuration vis-a-vis Hinduism and, Islam to a singular Philosophy of Religious Evolution of man. The raison detre of Sikhism emerging in the given historical context of unresolved contradiction between Hinduism and Islam, as the third path inheres in Guru Gobind Singh’s vision in the need for redeeming the essential belief and faith in God from the devitalising perversions of the faiths by their exponents and followers. Here, he gives a beautiful image of a tree being burnt up with its own leaves, indicating the process of the negation of the faiths by their own followers.

This is then the crux of the problem, that the Sikh tradition has always tried to visualise Sikhism as a faith in contradistinction both from Hinduism and Islam and not as the continuity of one or the off-shoot of the other. Sikhs were conceived as protestant believers and their faith derived as much vitality from a passionate belief in the existence of God as from their faith that God had to be related to the human conditions and the total historic milieu that shaped it.

The psycho-social relevance of the teachings of Guru Nanak is rooted in his sensitivity to the historical fact of the Islamic state as an agent of the process of alienation of man both from his own spiritual identity and the new oppressive discriminatory system of theocracy as also a coercive
orthodoxy of traditionalism and formalism. In a number of incisive references super-imposition on the Indian culture of the Muslim cultural patterns and the willing subservience to those of the Hindus, Guru Nanak invites repeated attention to the element of decadence which is hall-mark of any tradition that does not admit of the necessity of preserving and strengthening its internal core of values against the debilitating and coercive influence of ritualism and formalism. But about all, Guru Nanak was concerned by the process of dehumanisation both of the oppressive over-lords whether temporal or religious and the oppressed multitudes ignorant as much of their divine ancestry as of their spiritual destiny. The starting point in this process is Guru Nanak’s ironical denunciation of the psychology of surrender both physical and cultural with which the people accepted the ascendancy of the conquering faith forcibly imposed upon them.

There are three expressions of the element of coercion involved in this situation all of which in their own different ways partake of the denial and surrender of the most vital element of human consciousness: human integrity. Firstly, the ascendancy of Islam, which Guru Nanak obviously presents, is involved in Allah, Khuda and Rahman becoming prevalent as the names of God and enforcement of the sacred books of Islam in place of the traditional Hindu or non-Islamic texts. Secondly, it finds expression in the imposition of levies on the places of Hindu worship, the worshippers and the gods which was symptomatic of the inferior status assigned to the Hindus in the new scheme of things. Thirdly, it leads to the element of hypocrisy of those Hindus who while adhering to their rituals had in fact become collaborators of the alien Masters even in the matter of serving them, for the implementation of coercive measures against their co-religionists. In all these instances can be perceived the deep anguish of Guru Nanak at the devaluation of man and human reality at the hands of deadening formalisms and the absence of resistance, to the forcible change and conversion, on the part of the victims. Another important detail of Guru Nanak’s realisation of the state of alienation both of the individual and that of the social groups is provided by his denunciation of the kings and their minions as butchers and confining them to the realm of predatory animals with whom no human communication was possible.

To revitalise a defeated and demoralised people, victim alike of an “alien and continuously alienating, theocratic state”, and corrupt and depraved priestly class, Guru Nanak deliberately tried to enlarge the reality of man by divesting the king and the priest of their usurped glory; the king as the agency for interpretation and enforcement of God’s will and the priest as the mediator between the profane and the sacred. Here, it must be remembered that Guru Nanak portrays both as utterly lacking in any dignity and grace which should attach to them in case they were accepted as reflection of God on earth. On the contrary, their portrayal by Guru Nanak emphasises the facts of their avarice, corruptibility, moral depravity, the transitory nature of their power and glory and their consequent degradation which all bring out in bold relief their human and hence non-mysterious and non-divine character.

The fact of the matter is that Guru Ninak, concerned as he was with the redemption of the human situation was actually sensitive to the sense of religious awe concomitant to the projection, by the contemporary ideology, of the kings and priests as the reflection of the agents of God. In order to make man aware of his inherent divinity, it was necessary to lift the pervasive sense of religious awe and political terror that characterised the medieval Indian religious ethos. Guru Nanak
did precisely that by demonstrating that kings and priests were in no way superior to a common
men. If anything, they were less than man for all their inhuman pre-occupations. Having failed in
discharging their ordained obligations they had debased themselves beyond any hope of redemption.
The potent characteristic of fearlessness, recognised by Guru Nanak as one of the divine attributes,
held forth freedom from fear as the primary goal for man and hence was an essential stage on the
way to perfection, the sumnum bonum of all spiritual endeavour. Thus, Guru Nanak envisaged a new
man not only free from fear but also aware of his indwelling divinity which amongst other things
also meant creative originality. While the freedom from fear of the kings demanded and begot the
daring to charge of political order, the negation of the fear of the priests delivered man from
bondage to traditionalism, to irrelevant gods and their incarnations, and the esoteric rituals which
had been reduced to mechanical devices for framing existential worries and concerns of man.

According to Guenter Lewy, “Ancient and medieval Indian political thought considered man to
be inherently evil and sinful, and kingship, instituted by divine decree, was the consequence of and
remedy for man’s imperfection. Only the ruler could preserve the social system and prevent total
ruin. Political thought emphasised order and cautioned against disturbing traditions and established
institutions. It stressed the discharge of duties in a stratified social order, and it was centered around
the concept of civil obligation.”

It is quite significant that Guru Nanak, instead of projection the kings and the oppressive
political and administrative structure designed by them as established by the divine decree, should
have found them as evil with which there could not be any scope of reconciliation. That this departure
from the prevalent ideology had in itself seeds of political revolution became evident in the later
developments that demonstrated the dynamism of Guru Nanak’s outlook on that world and life. A
still more remarkable feature of this understanding of the human situation lies in this, that Guru
Nanak should perceive in this scheme of things a factor inducing dehumanisation as much of the
oppressive masters as of the hapless masses whom he described as blind and ignorant, who had
been rendered dead in soul.

All these aspects of alienation, coercion, religious persecution and abject submission of the
common men and women to the tyranny are further emphasised in the well-known Babur Vani
verses which constitute a vivid testimony to the violence of the times in which Guru Nanak lived
and realised his vision. It will even be quite permissible to say that the tragedy of man with which
Guru Nanak was concerned comes about all the more dramatically and poignantly in these verses.
Here again, the hoards of Babur, the Mughal conquerer, are described as the marriage procession of
evil demanding forcibly the hand of the helpless bride, that is India.

On a par with Guru Nanak’s perception of the theocratic structure of the states as evil in all
parts, he visualises the empty rituals which had assumed a virtual autonomy of their own unrelated
to any inner spiritual content that these might have originally enshrined and the entire priestly class
of whatsoever denominational faith, sect or cult presiding over them as another form of evil to
which man was made subject.

The human crisis, according to Guru Nanak, was the outcome of the disintergration of human
personality due to the divorce of outer form from the inner content and adherence to the former at

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the cost of the latter. He is unrelenting in his exposure of this phenomenon as an unmistakable part of his contemporary religious scene. No aspect of the reversal of human consciousness and endeavour from the allegiance to the universal human values to the adherence to the outer forms in any religious faith of his times be it Hinduism, Jainism, Islam or the later day cults of Buddhism such as Nathas, Jogis and Sidhas escaped his hard look. Here, it will be interesting to recall his exhortations to the followers of all the faiths for a return to the essential simplicity of man’s faith in God and commitment to the truth, freedom and integration, psychological, social and mystical, so as to reinvest the religious symbols or practices of their faiths with a new inner life.

Several commentators of Sikh faith have seen in Guru Nanak a kindered soul of the Sufis of Islam and the Bhaktas and saints of the Hindu faith. Dr. J.S. Grewal even suggests that the idiom of Guru Nanak’s denunciation of particularism and ritualism at least of the Islam is akin to that of the Sufi mystics. A similar assertion can be made is respect of the same trends in Hinduism which come in for equal, if not greater, condemnation by him in the same vein as that of the Hindu Bhaktas and saints. But the crucial point which is not appreciated is that while Guru Nanak goes along with the Sufis and the Bhaktas to a certain length, he ultimately reaches past both of them when he demands a new praxis both, individual and social, to make a bid for changing what was dead and rotten.

Guru Nanak’s religious quest starts appropriately with man and the human condition in both, the necessary and the contingent, eternal and the temporal contexts. In the beginning of Asa Di Var Guru Nanak gives a succinct description of the man’s religious endeavour as transformation of man into God. This introduces the first dynamic principle of Sikh thought which envisages not only a future for man but also the prospect of a spiritual elevation while retaining his identity as man.25

In this respect, it will be pertinent to remember that for Guru Nanak the individual personality and consciousness emerge out of the divine light and the divine light reveals itself through the individuals.26 Thus, for Guru Nanak, man signifies the meeting place of the physical actuality and spiritual possibility.27a In another manner of highlighting the same truth Guru Nanak defines human ego27b as the source both of hell and heaven, of nobility and debasement.28 Another interesting consequence of this doctrine lies in the acceptance of all the facets of human life as diverse revelations of the divine immanence.29a From such investment of the variety of life and the variations of cultural identities with divinity29b it is only a small step towards the ideology of cultural and even political pluralism as a prior condition for a sane social order29c as argued by Kapur Singh most lucidly in Prasharprasna30 and Sachi Sakhi.31

Hew McLeod obviously hits upon the right point when he defines Guru Nanak’s concept of human condition as being that of the unregenerate man. This is helpful also in working out Guru Nanak’s idea of theodicy. Evil in Guru Nanak’s frame-work is not inbuilt in the human situation per se. Man is not sinful by nature. Guru Nanak envisions evil in three major aspects: falsehood, alienation from God and bondage to self. It also manifests itself as a factor which checkmates the regenerative processes through which man acquires truth, integration and freedom and ultimately his spiritual identity. These regenerative process come into play when man is awakened out of his ignorance of his divine origin. Such an awakened soul is led on from gnosis i.e., knowledge of God to personal and social praxis i.e., action as an agent of God in history.
The highest category in Sikh faith is, of course, that of God who is the eternal truth but the man’s goal is set by Guru Nanak beyond the knowledge of God in active, personal and social action towards truthful behaviour i.e., the personal and social action through which man reveals and makes manifest his spiritual essence and divine creativity. This dynamic concept of man not only marked a bold departure from the then prevalent theories of human debasement but also held forth the concept of man’s creative efflorescence as against extant philosophies of mystical self-annihilation.32 In Guru Nanak’s faith vital question is not that of man losing his identity in God but that of God’s awakening within man.

An important detail of this new man of Guru Nanak relates to his concept of salvation which did not mean extinction of human consciousness and personality through dissolution into God but return to the world in the transformed state of active selflessness and service to others. This provided the second dynamic principle of Sikh faith, that of a striving from human solidarity. Combined with the first dynamic principle that of the man’s inherent capacity for a spiritual redemption through self-awareness and struggle the second principle of human solidarity worked for reintegrating the atomised and fragmented Indian society thanks to the distinctions of caste, creed and birth. It will be seen that in both the processes the major thrust is provided by identification of man with God, firstly, in realising the presence of God in one’s own soul and secondly, by perceiving it in others. Thereby, Guru Nanak was able to relate God to human situation not in the passive manner of asceticism or mystical experience nor by investing man’s life on earth with an autonomous status and deifying the purely materialist pursuit. Guru Nanak’s path lay in the acceptance of the reality of man on a par with that of God and then in relating one to the other. It is in this background that Guru Nanak’s assertion that both indulgence and renunciation are two extremes and the Dharma lies in mediating between the two of them becomes meaningful.33

Still further, Guru Nanak while acutely aware of man’s only too well-known human failings of spiritual and moral slothfulness and other infirmities of flesh and blood refused to reconcile with the idea of the lack of concern of God for the pitiable condition of man. On the other hand, he believes God to be accountable for the plight of man. He not only questioned the idea of a God not pained by the wails and lamentations of a suffering humanity,34 but also remonstrated with Him for his anger towards men and women who were but his own children.35 This is why he takes recourse to the idea of divine grace as a factor in redeeming human condition and leading man out of this predicament. But above all, Guru Nanak believes in God arising out of the soul of man rather than desending from the heavens on high.

Another direction in which the meeting ground between man and god was located by Guru Nanak is revealed by implicit rejection by him of theological claims of finality of revelation on behalf of any particular faith of denomination and the concept of any particular people as the chosen, i.e., theologically privileged people. The reference above to the elements of protest, revolt or confrontation against other religious traditions in Guru Nanak’s teachings are directed not against any particular approach to God but against the distortion by the followers of their respective faiths through their subordination to narrow personal or group interests. Guru Nanak’s demand from the followers of different faiths is not to discard them but only to adhere, in practical ways, to the essential vision and values of those faiths. Here again, we find open acceptance of cultural pluralism.
in the vision of mutual accommodation between different faiths on an equal footing. This anti-
particularist thrust of the teachings of Guru Nanak in the medieval Indian setting proved to be a
potent force for challenging the theories of the religious conformism on the one hand and those of
conventionalism on the other, thus broadening the human vistas.

Guru Nanak not only entered into dialogue with the religious faiths of his times but also sought
to promote an active element of understanding and self-examination in each faith so as to help to re-
awaken their inner spirit. Thus, Guru Nanak can be perceived as anticipating the modern times in
which stress has shifted from conflict between different faiths towards exploring the possibility of
dialogue between them so as to recognise and understand each faith in its own setting and in
accordance with its inner light. In a very vital sense, Guru Nanak’s concept of man also implied the
freedom of conscience by which the modern societies lay great store.

To conclude, I cannot do better than inviting attention to the two conflicting images through
which Guru Nanak perceived the eternal contradiction on the affairs of man. I have in mind the
images of a sparrow soaring high in the sky and the massively lethargic and lustful elephant wantonly
lolling in the dust and wasting himself in his bondage to his own being. If one were to pursue the
image of the singing birds and sparrows in its course through Sikh history one will find the meek
sparrows ultimately overwhelming and defeating the hawks. The liberated man of Guru Nanak
strives from a passive, spatial state of fragmented and corporeal existence towards the active state of
spiritual and integrative essence. While Guru Nanak negated all contradictions between man and
man based upon distinctions of caste, birth or faith he developed a new distinction between the self-
absorbed and the self-transcending people. With his intense faith in God he upheld self-transcendence
of the awakened man as the only meaningful pursuit of man.

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