

Theme 5 – The Role of Religious Institutions

Presentation: Sikhism and the Environment

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Creating the world, God has made it a place to practice spirituality.¹

The Sikh scripture declares that the purpose of human beings is to achieve a blissful state and to be in harmony with all creation. It seems, however, that the human race has drifted away from this ideal.

The demands of national economic growth and individual needs are depleting natural resources, and there is serious concern that the earth may no longer be a sustainable bio-system. There is a sense of crisis in all parts of the world.

This crisis reintroduces the basic question of the purpose of our presence as human beings in this world. We are called to the vision of Guru Nanak which is of a world society comprising God-conscious human beings, to whom the earth and the universe are sacred. Guru Nanak laid the foundations of Sikhism in the late fifteenth century. His writings, and those of the other Sikh gurus who succeeded him, as well as those of other spiritual leaders, are included in the scripture, the *Guru Granth Sahib*. The *Guru Granth* has been the effective guru of the Sikhs since 1708, when Guru Gobind Singh declared that there would be no more human gurus. The name *sikh* means disciple or learner of the Truth.

Guru Nanak would diagnose the increasing barrenness of the earth's terrain as a reflection of the increasing emptiness within humans, and he would say the first step in solving the problems in our world is spiritual, and lies in prayer and accepting God's *hukam*. It is difficult to translate certain Sikh concepts accurately. *Hukam* is one such concept - it may be best described as a synthesis of God's will or command, and so 'system'. With an attitude of humility, and surrender to the Divine Spirit as manifest in the *hukam*, conscientious human beings can seek to redress the current crises of the environment and social justice. In the Sikh way this is done through the guidance of the guru, who is thought of as the Divine Master in his role of messenger of God.

A Sikh theologian, Kapur Singh, explains that Sikhism has three postulates implicit in its teachings. Firstly, there is no ultimate duality between spirit and matter. Secondly, human beings have the capacity to participate consciously in the process of spiritual progress. Thirdly, the highest goal of spiritual progress is harmony with God while remaining earth-conscious, so that the world itself may be transformed into a spiritual plane of existence.

Unity of spirit and matter

An important Sikh doctrine is that, as the product of God's activity, all parts of the universe are holy. God is an all-pervasive being manifest in the various elements of creation. Every form in this world is a manifestation of its Creator.

The Creator created Himself...
And created all creation in which He is manifest!
You Yourself the bumble-bee, flower, fruit and the tree.
You Yourself the water, desert, ocean and the pond.
You Yourself the big fish, tortoise and the Cause of causes.
Your form cannot be known.²

The Sikh view is that spirit and matter are not antagonistic. Guru Nanak in fact declares that spirit is the sole reality and matter only a form of spirit:

When I saw truly, I knew that all was primeval.
Nanak, the subtle (spirit) and the gross (material) are, in fact, identical.³

This is the ultimate basis of the Sikh belief that harmony with God directly entails that human beings

endeavour to live in harmony with God's creation. As we will now see, this first postulate strongly informs the second and third.

Spiritual progress through discipline

The second postulate is that people are capable of further spiritual progress by maintaining a highly disciplined inner life. It is not required that human beings outwardly renounce the world. They must maintain their life in it and uphold their worldly responsibilities. Sikhism simply teaches against a life of conspicuous, wasteful consumption. The gurus in fact recommend the judicious utilisation of the material resources available to humans, and teach them to respect the dignity of all life, whether human or not. Such a respect for life can only be fostered when one first recognises the Divine spark within oneself, then sees it and cherishes it in others. As the *Guru Granth Sahib* says:

This little shrine of the human body!
This great opportunity of life!
The object is to meet the Beloved, thy Master!

The concrete method suggested by Guru Nanak by which we may fulfil our vocation of spiritual progress, involves meditation, prayer, and mastery over five negative forces: lust, anger, materialistic attachment, conceit and greed. These together constitute what Sikhs term '*haumai*' - literally 'I am-ness'. Mastering *haumai* is achieved by developing five positive forces: compassion, humility, contemplation, contentment, and selfless service (*seva*). As the home itself is an ideal environment for the exercise of these disciplines, the Sikh religion preaches strong family involvement and a person pursuing private spiritual discipline must also work to create an atmosphere for other members of the family to progress spiritually.

Transformation of the world

The third postulate is that the true end of human beings is their emergence into God-consciousness, while remaining aware of the world. The product of this dual focus is an intense desire to transform the world into a higher plane of existence. Through a life based on the method prescribed by the gurus, individuals may achieve this transformation. Such truly emancipated, valiant and enlightened spirits (*jivan-mukta*, *brahma-gyani*) become the real benefactors of humanity and the world around them. In this God-conscious state they are yet involved in human problems and society commensurately with their realisation, proving their effectiveness there. The emancipated person thus lives with the mission of the emancipation of all! A true Sikh is fervently in favour of human rights, the environment, and justice:

The God-conscious person is animated with an intense desire to do good in this world.⁴

Practising the philosophy

Environmental concerns must be viewed as part of the broader issue of human development and social justice. Many environmental problems, and in particular the exploitation of resources in developing nations, are due to the poverty of large parts of the population. In view of this an integrated approach becomes necessary.

The tenth guru founded the Order of the *Khalsa* in 1699, for those who practise the spiritual discipline of Sikhism. Over the last three centuries the members of the *Khalsa* have stood up for the rights of the oppressed even at the cost of their own lives, maintaining the *Khalsa* vision of a global society as framed in the *Guru Granth* itself:

Henceforth such is the Will of God:
No man shall coerce another;
No person shall exploit another.
Each individual has the inalienable birth-right to seek and pursue happiness and self-fulfilment.
Love and persuasion is the only law of social coherence.⁵

The *Khalsa*'s members have opposed any force that has threatened the freedom and dignity of human beings. In the eighteenth century it was the oppressive rulers of northern India, and invaders from Afghanistan. In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries its members struggled against the oppression of European colonists and Indian governments. The ideal of the *Khalsa* is to strive for justice for all, not

merely for its own members.

The institution of *sangat*, *pangat* and *langar*

The Sikh gurus all actively challenged the caste system in India. Guru Nanak said:

There are the lowest men among the low-castes.
Nanak, I shall go with them.
What have I got to do with the great?
God's eye of mercy falls on those who take care of the lowly.⁶

So it was that the Sikh gurus in their travels preferred the homes of those who made an honest living, to the homes of those who thrived on exploitation. The Sikh gurus also moulded new traditions to engender a more equitable society. In consequence they created institutions that still form the basis of Sikh society. They invited people of all castes and creeds to meditate together - an institution called *sangat* - and either before or after this meditation, the participants were asked to sit and eat together irrespective of their background, termed *pangat*. The Sikh gurus moreover started a tradition of freely distributing food to the poor, called *langar*. These three ideas, still much alive today, were in contrast with Indian society, which had separate temples or wells for social outcasts.

Equality of women

Any solutions to the problem of the environment must be sensitive to women's concerns, and must include women as equals. Piecemeal solutions to environmental problems will merely focus, for example, on limiting population growth through family planning measures which often end up abusing women's rights, and should be rejected on those grounds alone.

Sikhism contains important lessons on this. Guru Nanak and other Sikh gurus advocated equality for women and took steps to implement this. Nanak denounced the idea that spirituality was only for men, and not for women. Guru Amardas in the sixteenth century advocated widow marriages and strongly opposed the custom of *sati* - the Indian practice whereby widows burned themselves with their husband's corpse at cremation. He appointed a large number of women preachers, and at least one bishop - Mathura Devi - four hundred years ago. The Sikh gurus also raised their voice against the *purdah* or veil. Amardas did not even allow the Queen of Haripur to come into the religious assembly wearing a veil. The immediate effect of these reforms was that without the burden of unnecessary and unreasonable customs, Sikh women became the temporal and spiritual colleagues of men, often acting as their conscience, and have proved themselves to be the equals of men in service, sacrifice and bravery. Since the late nineteenth century individual Sikh men and women, in various cities and towns, took the initiative to start women's colleges and schools, and women's education was part of a general drive to improve education among the Sikhs initiated by Sikh organisations in the 1920s.

Community-based sharing of resources

Traditional modes of life in Northern India have involved large numbers of people depending upon relatively limited resources. Keynotes are minimal consumption, recycling and sharing of resources. Traditional practices have maintained lands and forests in the vicinity of human settlements as community property. For instance in rural Punjab an important feature of the Sikh *gurudwara* (temple), is the community land which surrounds it. This is not used for agriculture, but instead has groves providing shelter and a source of firewood. Moreover most *gurudwaras* were specifically designed with artificial lakes, or were located near natural water-sources such as rivers or pools which were always considered a community resource. For instance, Amritsar grew up around the *Harimandir* (known as the *Golden Temple*) and the *Amrit Sarovar* (the *Pool of Nectar* - a reference to the water).

Since the time of the gurus, the Sikh *gurudwara* has included institutionalised practices that emphasise sharing. In addition to the functions already mentioned - as a place to congregate for prayer and meditation, and as a community kitchen - the *gurudwara* also traditionally functions as a place to stay for travellers, a place for dispensing medical care, and a place to educate the young.

Conclusion

Sikhism regards a co-operative society as the only truly religious society, as the Sikh view of society is grounded in the worth of every individual as a microcosm of God. Therefore an individual must never be coerced, or manipulated:

If thou wouldst seek God, demolish and distort not the heart of any individual.⁷

Sikhs believe that an awareness of that sacred relationship between human beings and the environment is necessary for the health of our planet and for our survival. A new 'environmental ethic' dedicated to the wise use of the resources provided by a bountiful nature, must start with a dedicated application of our tried and true spiritual heritage.

¹ *Guru Granth Sahib* p.1035

² *Guru Granth Sahib* p.1016

³ *Guru Granth Sahib* p. 281

⁴ *Guru Granth Sahib* p.273

⁵ *Guru Granth Sahib* p.74

⁶ *Guru Granth Sahib* p.15

⁷ *Guru Granth Sahib* p.1384