

Sikhism

The Christian claim to the finality of Christ has been current since the earliest times of Christianity. So great was the historic impact of the personality of Christ among his immediate disciples and followers that they could not conceive of any other teacher of mankind who could be equally great. Naturally, the disciples had not heard of the Lord Buddha, nor of any other previous teacher apart from the Hebrew prophets, and at that time Mohammed had not arisen nor had any of the Sikh Gurus appeared. They could not be blamed, therefore, if they accorded to Jesus Christ the status of an unique, once and for all, manifestation of the Divine on earth. Moreover, the scriptures, which were written a considerable time after the death of Christ, record stories about him and sayings which reveal the personality of a mystic whose sometimes enigmatic words could have been open to various interpretations. Some other religions also claim to have found the final answer to man's spiritual destiny, and the belief that eventually all mankind must either be redeemed through one exclusive and supreme faith, or else be cast into eternal damnation, is not entirely exclusive to Christianity. The Sikh religion, however, makes no such claim, nor does it claim for its Ten Gurus, or teachers, any unique place in history or any special kind of divinity. Yet it does claim to provide for the devotees of God a path to salvation equal to that of any other religion, and much more simple to understand than that of some.

In order to understand the Sikh attitude toward Christianity, and indeed, toward all other religions, it is necessary to examine briefly the roots and origins of the Sikh religion. It owes its birth to a religious reformation which took place in India in

the fifteenth century. Its founder was a teacher or Guru called Nanak who was born in 1469. Nanak came from a high-caste Hindu family; he was deeply interested in all forms of religion, and he studied Islam as well as Hinduism; he soon became well versed in the numerous religious and philosophic theories which were then current in India. Although Guru Nanak traveled widely to Ceylon, Northeast India, the outskirts of Tibet, Arabia, and Mecca, there is no record of his ever having come into contact with any form of Christianity, though Dr. A. C. Bouquet of Cambridge sees in Sikhism some similarity with Christianity. However, this similarity may easily have descended through Islam and the practical Sufism taught by Kabir immediately prior to Nanak in the Punjab.

Nanak had no quarrel with the highest principles of Hinduism and Islam, but he was highly dissatisfied with the way in which they were practiced and taught. Popular religion had largely degenerated into superstition, idol worship, intolerance, hypocrisy, and profiteering. Nanak's main concern was to teach the oneness of God; the way in which any human being could become aware of the presence of God, and the equality and brotherhood of all mankind. Thus, he first taught to his followers the Mool Mantra, a verse which appears at the beginning of the *Guru Granth Sahib*, the Sikh holy book:

There is One God,
His name is Truth,
The All-pervading Creator;
Without fear, without hatred;
Immortal, unborn, self-existent.
The Enlightener, by Grace.

True in the beginning; True throughout the ages;
True even now, Nanak, and forever shall be True.

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When Nanak said that God is unborn, he meant this to be in contradiction to the Hindu belief in avatars, a theory that the Divine soul is manifested on earth from time to time in the form of an earthly creature, sometimes a human being. God himself is unbounded and formless, said Nanak, therefore no single living creature can contain him. God is all-pervading; he is the reality behind all creation; he is both the matter and mind of all things; he is the first cause of all causes. His will guides the universe and works within it for his own purposes. Every being is illumined by his divine spark; every soul is a part of himself. This being the belief and teaching of Guru Nanak, it would have been impossible for him to accept the idea of a special incarnation, or the Christian claim to the divinity of Christ, or the uniqueness of his appearance in the course of history. Nanak would say instead, that God's light is manifest in all human beings, that man himself has sprung from the Divine, and that at the end of his journey of life, he is destined eventually to reach God again and merge his spark in the Light of all Lights. Thus, all men are equally the children of God, and no one can claim to be God's son more than another. The verse known as the Arti, by Guru Nanak, expresses the all-pervading nature of God:

The firmament is Your salver, Your lamps the sun and moon;
The galaxies of stars are like scattered pearls.
Your incense is the scent of sandalwood, Your fan the breeze;
The forests are Your flowers, O Lord of Light.
What divine worship is this!
O Destroyer of birth, this worship is Yours.
The unstruck notes of heaven are Your drums.
You have a thousand eyes and yet no eye;
A thousand forms are Yours, yet not one form.
You have a thousand stainless feet, and yet no foot;
A thousand nostrils Yours, yet not one nose.

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All this is Your fascinating play.
The light which dwells in all is Your light, Lord.
By the Guru's word revealed, it illumines everything.
This worship is the true one, it is Your delight, O God.
O Lord, my mind longs for Your lotus feet, as the honey-bee longs
for the flowers:
Night and day I thirst for them.
Give the water of Your favour to the sarang, Nanak,
That he may dwell in the love of Your name.

MAN'S KNOWLEDGE OF GOD

The Guru maintained that God can reveal himself to man through all religions. One of the fundamental precepts of the Sikh religion is tolerance and respect for all other faiths, even where there is disagreement on details of belief. Guru Nanak taught that, provided the rules of conduct of a religion are carried out with sincerity and a pure heart and are directed toward the love and service of mankind, any faith can lead the devotee to God. Without love and with only the mechanical observance of prayers, fasts, and rituals, there can be no spiritual progress. In Sikhism God is revealed to man through the Gurus' word: the divinely inspired utterances of the ten Sikh Gurus which are recorded in the *Guru Granth Sahib*. He is also revealed through the lives and examples of the Gurus, saints, prophets and holy men of any religion. This is known to the Sikhs as *sadh sangat*, the society of the saints with whom the Sikh is supposed to keep company in order to be inspired by them, to learn from them and to follow their example. This is the manifest aspect of God. But the Sikh must also remember that God exists in the unmanifested aspect so that his attributes are also described by negative terms, such as formless, colorless, unknowable, or indescribable.

THE WAY TO SALVATION

Whether man receives this revelation of God depends on his own efforts. If he opens his mind to the word of the Guru, to the good influence of the saints, if he leads a good and useful life, and remembers God's name in his heart, he may, with the aid of God's grace, achieve some inner vision of the divine. The Sikh way to God is made clear in the scriptures which were written and compiled by Guru Nanak and six of his nine successors. Briefly, the way is this: that after having gone through numerous births in lower forms of life, the soul or the spark of divinity which originally came from God, eventually takes birth in human form. Then, being human, with the additional attributes of free will, speech, and the choice of doing good or evil, the spirit has his opportunity to realize his true identity and eventually to seek reconciliation and reunion with God. By God's grace man may come into contact with a Guru or teacher who can show him the way to salvation. The Guru is not in any sense to be regarded in the same way that the Christians regard Christ. He is not in any special way divine, but he is a man who has already trodden the path toward salvation and who has himself realized the perfect truth. He is one who knows God by personal experience and whose soul is united with God; he is a living liberated soul. The Gurus of the Sikhs were regarded in this light; they were not worshiped, but both during their lives and after they have always been deeply revered by their followers. The writings which they left are regarded as having been divinely inspired, and the holy book, the *Guru Granth Sahib*, is now regarded as the only Guru of the Sikhs.

Once having accepted his Guru, man must follow the Guru's teaching with the utmost devotion and faith. The Sikh discipline teaches him to remember God's name constantly, to

immerse his soul in the living presence of God day and night, during all his worldly activities. The Sikh must lead an active life of love and service to his fellow men and with the obligations and duties of his family and household. This was the way of life practiced and taught by the Gurus. It was not the Guru's function to act as an intercessor between God and man, nor to demonstrate God's love for mankind. In Sikh philosophy man and God need no one to intercede, and there is no necessity for any demonstration of love to be made. God's love is completely and visibly manifest in the beauty and wonders of his creation and in his countless gifts to mankind. Therefore, God needs no son; he needs no one to create for him; he needs no single, exclusive, or unique messiah. His light is revealed to man in all things, but most brightly in those souls who, having achieved salvation themselves, stand as his messengers on earth to guide mankind in the ways of truth, righteousness, and divine love. Such people have appeared throughout history, not as divine incarnations, but as human beings, as buddhas, gurus, saints, and prophets such as Moses, Jesus, and Mohammed. The ordinary man is like a light enclosed in a glass which is dark, smoky, and opaque, so that the light within is dimmed or completely obliterated; but the saint is like a lamp with bright, clear crystal glass through which the light shines forth fully revealed in all its beauty and glory. Man's eventual salvation rests partly on his own efforts and partly on God's grace. The Guru is there to guide him; like the leader in a difficult rock climb, he finds the route, makes and tests the footholds, and stands firm with the safety rope if his disciple should slip; but the disciple himself must make the effort to climb.

Guru Nanak emphatically maintained that no amount of religiosity would help a man to salvation if he did not at the same time, lead a morally good life. He said, "There is nothing

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greater than Truth, but greater still is true living." The way to salvation in Sikhism is twofold: through repetition of the name or devotion, and through the service of mankind. Thus, in remembering the name, the Sikh may use any name which indicates a good and noble attribute of God. Such remembrance will elevate his soul and bring with it an increase of such attributes in himself; his actions will accordingly become nobler and purer and his life will acquire a divine purpose and sanctity. Guru Gobind Singh, the Tenth Guru who died in 1708, composed a long poem called the Jap Sahib which gives hundreds of names and attributes of God:

I salute the Sage of Sages,
Lord of the Worldly;
Kindest of All,
Sustainer of All.

However, the favorite name often uttered by Sikhs is "Wahe-guru," Wonderful Lord.

Service is essential for the good of man's soul and for the betterment of all mankind. It is true to say that no man can be completely happy while any of his brethren still suffer. If God is seen to be in all mankind, then to serve mankind is also to serve God, while to reject the cry of humanity is to turn one's back on God. This, at least, is one point on which Christians and Sikhs would agree. On the other hand, if man disregards God and the love and service of mankind; if he leads a life of sin, hatred, and selfishness, he will be bound to suffer eventually for his acts. He will reap what he has sown, and, according to Sikh belief, he will continue to be reborn on this earth and to suffer the consequences of his evildoing until he turns toward God and tries to do good. Some Sikhs, like some Christians, believe in heavens and hells as actual places

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to which the spirit is assigned, but there is at least no doubt that they do exist as states of mind and that people suffer in them accordingly; but for the Sikh, there is no permanent hell and there is no final and irrevocable condemnation even for the worst of evildoers, for all may have an endless number of opportunities to escape from the rounds of rebirth and reach perfect Truth.

THE GOAL OF HISTORY

There are many apparent differences between religions, but it is my belief that such contradictions as there are, are more frequently due to differences in individual interpretation and diverging viewpoints of the same center of reality. According to Christianity, as I understand it, the final end of history would be the establishment of Christ's rule over all mankind. Here also, much depends on interpretation, and this idea can be given a parallel in the Sikh belief that all souls will eventually be reunited with God. However, in Sikh cosmology, the destiny of this earth and its inhabitants is not separate or different from the destiny of the whole universe. To the Gurus God is not only the Lord and Creator of this earth nor only of the solar system. He is the ruler and source of all worlds, both spiritual and material. His domain is over the universe, the galaxy, and the millions of galaxies beyond. There is no beginning nor end of God's creation known to man, either in time or space. However, if we accept the theory of evolution (which is quite compatible with the Sikh scriptures), we can trace the beginnings of man from the first flicker of life on this earth. We can trace his progress physically and mentally, but we can only guess at the spiritual state of man in the first stages of his emerging intellect. We can guess that he must have been in a state of innocence, not being aware of good and evil and

knowing no moral standards; therefore, in the beginning, he must have been incapable of doing wrong. As man's self-awareness and ego developed, so did his potentiality for doing good or evil; his fear of retribution and his capacity for mental unhappiness. At the same time—we have no idea how early in man's development—he came to be aware of the existence of God nor do we know whether early man worshiped one God, the Creator, or many nature gods or ancestor spirits. Both theories have been put forward by rival schools of thought. Dr. Martin Lings supports the theory that when man was first created, he lived in a golden age when he believed in monotheism, and that only later when he developed agriculture, and settled permanently, did he degenerate into polytheism. According to Sikhism, however, man has come, it is true, from a state of spiritual purity and innocence, but this was an innocence without knowledge; it was an untested and untried purity. Man, unaware of himself and his divine origin, was really in ignorance and without real virtue. It is only when he has passed through the fire of life and when he has been tried to the utmost that his strength and virtue are proven and his final perfection becomes unassailable.

As early man did not know the real nature of God, he invented a kind of God who, like himself, was motivated by desire, anger, self-interest, love, and hatred. Such were the many gods of the ancients, and even the unique god of the early Hebrews was attributed with very human emotions. But the Hebrew concept of God gradually developed and changed as he revealed himself through Abraham, Moses, and the subsequent prophets. Unlike the other gods, he was one who demanded righteousness, holiness, and exclusive loyalty from his worshippers. This concept eventually culminated in the teaching of Jesus whose God was the divine Father of all mankind, infinitely merciful and forgiving, loving and perfect. This God

wanted man to become like him in these respects: "Forgive your brother as your Father in heaven forgives you," said Jesus. Such a concept of God was certainly the highest that had ever been reached in the Western world. This idea subsequently permeated into later Jewish thought and brought about the flowering of modern Judaism. It deeply influenced Islam, founded by Mohammed who was born in A.D. 570. Mohammed preached strict monotheism and the idea of Allah, the Compassionate, the Merciful, which he developed from his early contact with both Christians and Jews and transformed into a religion particularly suited to the nature of the Arab tribes and replacing their old idolatrous religions.

Meanwhile, in the East, the religion of compassion, Buddhism, had been founded by the Lord Buddha, while the later forms of Hinduism developed the highly spiritual and ethical philosophy of the supreme Brahman manifested through the noble person of god, Krishna of the Gita. Both the Semitic and the Oriental traditions are the parents of the Sikh faith. Guru Nanak was influenced by the best of both Islam and Hinduism. There is no doubt that the idea of One God, the Father of mankind, as developed in Judaism and taught by Christ, came to Guru Nanak through Islam, but the notion of the all-pervading origin of all things, Brahman, is also combined with it in Sikhism. The ideals of compassion, mercy, love, and service to mankind which are part of the Sikh faith, were developed first in both Christianity and Buddhism, whereas ideas of universal brotherhood can also be found in both traditions, though certainly more strongly in Islam. Thus, not only Christianity and Christ have a unique place in history, but all the other religions as well have contributed something special to the story of mankind.

Mankind continues now, to be as diverse as he was in the past, and, although there is a certain merging of cultures and

aces in the modern world, it is not likely that all mankind will ever come under the spiritual sway of one special religion. Nor would this be a desirable state of affairs. People are individuals who are extremely diverse in their rates of progress and in their stages of spiritual development: each person needs a belief which accords with his own particular spiritual state, and each different path has its own special merits. It will be discovered by the sincere seeker after truth that although the orthodox beliefs of religions appear to differ widely from each other, yet the mystic who truly perceives with the inner eye of his soul, the perfect light of reality, is no longer concerned with differences between so-called "divinity" or so-called "humanity," nor with the superiority of one teacher over another. By whatever path the mystic may have reached the light, he will be able to see, as the Guru says, "The current of truth running through all religions." This being so, there is no justification for any one religious group to claim that theirs is the only true way to salvation and that it is only by following their particular master that all mankind can be saved. Thus, I firmly believe that God is merciful and loving toward all human beings, whether or not they believe in the finality of Christ. In the words of the Fifth Guru, Arjan, who died for the Sikh faith:

He is a forgiving God; kind to the distressed,
Responsive to love, and merciful always.
The Divine Herdsman places Himself at the head of His
straying flock,
And feeds them, one and all.
He is the Primal Being, the Cause of all causes, the
Creator,
The very breath of life to those who love Him.
Whoever worships Him is cleansed,
And is attached to love and devotion.

We are low, ignorant and devoid of virtue,
But we have come to Thy protection, O Lord of all
resources.

A Jew Looks at Jesus

"Who do you say that I am?" Jesus asked of his disciples (Matt. 16:15), and this question, which led to Peter's confession of faith, still remains a crucial question, for the Jew no less than for the gentile, today no less than nineteen hundred years ago. It is this question I should like to discuss here. Speaking as a Jew, from out of what I take to be the authentic tradition of Jewish faith, what can I say about Jesus, the man of Nazareth whom Peter hailed as the Christ?

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Jesus was, first of all, a great and incomparable moral teacher. Of that there cannot be, and indeed never has been, any doubt. His exhortations and discourses stand unrivaled in the ethical literature of mankind. Men of all cultures and religions have paid tribute to the inexhaustible truth and power of his moral teaching. The Sermon on the Mount is known wherever men anywhere have concerned themselves with the moral life, and nowhere has it failed to stir the imagination and raise the heart to the self-giving love which Jesus preached. By the common testimony of mankind, this Jewish rabbi from Nazareth nineteen hundred years ago reached the high-water mark of moral vision and ethical teaching.

But if that were all there was to it, there would be no question to ask and no problem to discuss. For, as a moral teacher, Jesus stands merely as one among many, one of the rabbis of Judaism, entirely in the line of rabbinical tradition. Scholars,