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***GURU GRANTHA SHAHIB* : A MODEL FOR INTERFAITH UNDERSTANDING IN TODAY'S WORLD**

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Though all the religions of the world teach love, preach sympathy for others and encourage man to exercise utmost self-restraint and have most profoundly been a source of inspiration for the highest good of mankind, the world today is torn by conflicts, enmity and religious hatred. In this predicament, a lasting and peaceful society is impossible unless different faiths are understood in their proper perspectives. Therefore, it is necessary that people belonging to different faiths understand each other well. This necessitates a constant dialogue and effort to generate moral and hearty religious thinking. The advocates of all the religions of the world emphasize the importance of certain virtues and moral values. Only these can foster unity and cohesion of mankind. But the moral and religious values cannot be invoked by force. This can be achieved through the exchange of words, kind words, sincere words and loving words that can reach the deepest fathoms of the heart.

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There is no religion without the message of peace and peace never be attained completely without practice of religion. We must admit that peace and religion are complementary to each other. When the good of all is desired with an undivided mind peace will definitely be ours. But people belonging to different faiths, in most cases, have betrayed religious ideals and commitment to peace. The time has come when this betrayal must be corrected. And this can be and should be done through knowledge, dialogue and demonstration of the fact that love, compassion, selflessness and the inner force of truthfulness have ultimately greater power than hatred, enmity and self-interest.

There was a time when various religions, precisely because of their own convictions, were unable to cooperate and were even antagonistic to each other. But the time has changed to a great extent. Improvement in the means of transportation has made the earth smaller. Now religions, inspite of historic differences, must seek to unite all men for the attainment of world peace. Unless the peoples of faith come closer to each other the irreligious and antireligious forces will gain the upper hand. And this may lead to the further breaking up of the moral fiber of the human society. But at all cost, we must preserve the moral aspect of the texture of human society.

Religious people represent a vast majority of the peoples of the world. But unfortunately, we are a confused, divided and silent majority. The religious people of the world have been quite silent for long, and their silence has worked against human welfare. Our division, our timidity, and our silence left the mighty forces of terrorism, fanaticism, racism, poverty, and war unchallenged. Our silence has been paid for by the suffering of millions, for whom we should have been the advocates, the friends, and the spokesmen. The time has come when religionists, instead of antagonizing each other because

of what we once thought was a religious conviction, should cooperate with each other in order to contribute to the cause of peace for mankind.

Before I explain my own position as to what makes me feel that the *Guru Grantha Sahib* is a model for interreligious understanding in today's world let me speak a few words about the attitude of Islam towards other religions. I believe, this will help us to understand *Guru Grantha Sahib's* attitude towards other traditions well.

Islam seeks to bring about reconciliation between the followers of different faiths and establish a basis of respect and honour among them. Islam can claim uniqueness in that for a person to be a Muslim it is mandatory that he/she must have respect for the people of other faiths, must believe in all the prophets and in all the revealed texts. The Qur'an teaches us that God has sent down His revelation to all the people from time to time and no section of mankind has been left without Divine guidance. Many of the prophets of the Old Testament have been mentioned by name in the Qur'an, and so also is Jesus, who along with other prophets, is highly revered and honored by the Muslim all over the world. It is stated in the Qur'an : "Say [o believers]: We believe in Allah and that which is revealed unto us and that which was revealed unto Abraham and Ismael, and Isaac, and Jacob, and the tribes, and that which the Moses and Jesus received, and that which the Prophets received from their Lord. We make no distinction between any one of them, and unto Him we have surrendered."¹

If a man belies any one of them, he belies all and if a man confirms and believes in one of them he must and ought to confirm all. "One who does not believe in any one of the Prophets, would be a *Kafir*, though he must believe in all the

Prophets raised in India, China, Persia, Egypt, Africa, Europe and any other countries of the world." But a Muslim cannot definitely say about a particular person outside the list of the prophets named in the Qur'an, whether he was or was not a Prophet. Muslims are also not permitted to say anything against the holy men of other religions. Sikhism goes one step further in its attitude forwards other religions and in its world view.

Sikhism is one of the uncompromising monotheistic religions of the world. The founder of this religion is Guru Nanak who was termed as a messenger of peace, love, unity and brotherhood and an apostle of essential unity of all religions. In the words of Harmanam Singh Shan, "Guru Nanak is widely known and highly respected as a Prophet, a seer, a saint, a savior, a redeemer, a divine master and a spiritual preceptor."² Immeasurable showers of praises on Guru Nanak are there in many languages of the world. Only one is cited here.

Pure he was, so purity he preached
 Lovely he was, so love he preached
 Humble he was, so humility he preached
 Divine he was, so divinity he preached.³

Guru Grantha Sahib was the fountainhead of Sikh Philosophy and religion. This is a unique creation because this is the only scripture in the world which represents saints, *Sufis*, *Gurus*, and *Bhagats* from the cross section of the humanity. Guru Nanak happened to go outside Punjab towards many directions and being himself a votary of truth, he collected the voices of truth from wherever he got irrespective of the caste, colour, creed and the geographical station of the spiritual person concerned. Guru Nanak himself preserved them and handed over these truths to the second Guru, Guru Agnad. From him this collection went to Guru Amardas and Guru

Ramdas. Guru Arjan Das compiled a book named *Adi Grantha*, where he added the writings of Guru Agnad, Guru Amar Das and Guru Ramdas. This sacred book came to its final stage in the hands of Guru Govinda Singh.⁴

Sikhism is a religion, which was founded on the principles of interfaith understanding, mutual respect and harmony. From the very beginning, the leaders and the followers of this tradition preached the principles of interfaith respect, dialogue and understanding. To be a Sikh it is mandatory that he/she must respect and accept all other religions of the world and at the same time must protect, guard and allow the free-practice of the customs and rituals of others. The *Guru Grantha Sahib* teaches its followers to love all creation as God's own manifestation. Acceptance of all faiths and interfaith tolerance and understanding are basic to the teachings of *Guru Grantha Sahib*. History of the Sikh tradition shows remarkable consistency in the pursuit of these ideals and in the defense of the right to free worship of peoples of all faiths. J.S. Neki has quite wonderfully stated what *Guru Grantha Sahib* is and what it is not:

Sri Guru Grantha Sahib is a distinctive holy book. It is not a historical document, nor an album of mythology, nor a treatise about ritual, nor even a corpus of canonical statutes. It is a collection of lyrical songs ensconced in which is the guidance about how to live a God oriented life. It does not include the works of the Sikh Gurus alone, but also those of many other holy men from both the Aryan and the Semitic fold. It addresses the entire mankind. 'No one is alien, none a stranger' in its persuasion.⁵

The Sikh *Gurus* perceived that there was lack of real love among the people and therefore, they always laid great stress upon spiritual practices and preached the philosophy of one God, the Supreme Reality. They understood that a new strength

and vigour had to be imported into the field of religion and religious practices, it had to be brought home to the minds of the people that there really existed no differences in places of worship resorted to men of different faiths. That is why Guru Govind Singh, the tenth and the last Guru, states:

The temple and the mosque are the same, the Hindu worship and the Muslim prayer are the same, all men are the same; it is through erroneous judgment that they appear different ... All men have the same eyes, the same ears, the same body, the same build, a compound of earth, air, fire and water ... let no man, even by mistake suppose there is a difference.⁶

The Sikh *Gurus* systematized all the past Hindu and Islamic philosophies and brought a confluence in an organized manner for the temporal and spiritual uplift of all humanity without any discrimination. Guru Nanak made friends with both Hindus and Muslims. About him it was a common saying: "Baba Nanak Shah Fakir, Hindu ka Guru Musalman ka Peer." He never discriminated against any one. He treated the whole world as his own family and all the human beings as his brothers and sisters. He raised his voice against injustice anywhere. Like him all other *Gurus* were large hearted. None of them were parochial or narrow-minded, communal or caste-ridden. They set out for regeneration of mankind.

The *Guru Grantha Sahib* is a unique sacred text in the history of world religions. The pattern of this text was conceived and worked out in such a way that it can integrate various religions and *varnas* of India, spiritually, religiously and emotionally. Guru Nanak gave the idea of this kind of scripture, his successor *Gurus* subscribed to it and worked to collect material for most of the *Granth*. Guru Arjan collected most of the materials and contributed major portion of the *Granth* in the form of his *bani* and completed editing this sacred text in 1604 CE. Guru Govind Singh, added the hymns

of Guru Teg Bahadur to the *Guru Grantha Sahib* and installed it as the Guru-Eternal in 1708 CE, abolishing the personal Guruship.

The unique catholicity and egalitarian approach of Guru Arjan is evident in the fact that, other than the hymns of the Sikh Gurus, he incorporated the compositions of as many as thirty men of God, belonging to various castes, creeds, religions and vocations. Among them were Jaidev of Bengal, Surdas of Awudh; Namadev, Pipa, Sain, Kabir, Rabidas and Bhikhan of Uttar Pradesh; Dhannu of Rajasthan and Farid of Multan. Again, Kabir was a weaver, Sadhna was a butcher, Namdev a seamster, Dhana a Jath, Sain a barbar, Rabidas a cobbler, Farid a Muslim Sufi and some other mystic poets. It may be mentioned here that Guru Govind Singh employed fifty two poets in his court to translate various ancient texts of India with the object of unifying people of India through their own literature and culture. What a wonderful example of catholicity! What a wonderful instance of egalitarianism! And what a remarkable endeavour for interfaith understanding! I salute all those who made this possible.

Sikhism advocates four kinds of unity: unity of God, unity of mankind, unity of religions and unity of classes. In fact, the oneness of God and the essential oneness of humanity is the basic teaching of *Guru Grantha Sahib*. Guru Nanak was an advocate for peace and unity. For all the religions of the world, he envisaged a fellowship of faiths. His efforts for creating an atmosphere for world-reconciliation and world-amity were much ahead of his time.

The attitude of the Sikh Gurus towards the leaders or founders of other faiths and their sacred texts is unique and genuinely praiseworthy. For instance, the attitude of Guru Nanak towards Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) was

one of unbounded love and respect. In a verse which is given in the *Janam Sakhi* of Bhai Bala, Guru Nanak is stated to have said:

*dikha noor muhammadi, dikha nabi rasool.
Nanak qudrat dekh ke, khudi ghei sab bhool.*

“I have seen the light of Muhammad (with my mind’s eye). I have seen the prophet and the messenger of God, in other words, I have understood his message or imbibed his spirit. After contemplating the glory of God, my ego was completely eliminated.” In the same spirit Guru Govind Singh said in his, *Vichitra Nataka* that Prophet Muhammad was a divine messenger and a great man of religion and faith. Guru Arjan Dev had profound respect for Mian Mir, a celebrated Muslim sufi and had the foundation stone of the Golden Temple laid by him. This instance alone is enough to prove the magnanimity and catholicity of the Sikh Gurus.

It may be mentioned here that Muslim scholars had also tremendous appreciations for the Sikh *gurus*. For instance, Mirza Ghulam Ahmad, the founder of Ahmadiya sect of Islam, observed in his *Sat Bachan* that Guru Nanaka was a treasure house of divine knowledge and knower of all mysteries. The most famous poet-philosopher of this subcontinent Dr. Mohammad Iqbal in one of his immortal verses expressed that Guru Nanak was a perfect human being and awakened India from a dormant, dreamy condition to the realization of God.

To the Muslim and the Christian, Guru Nanak advises: Practice within your heart the teachings of the Qur’an and the Bible; restrain the ten sensory organs for straining into evil. Tie up the demons of desire and restore faith, charity and contentment and you shall be acceptable. Guru Nanak vehemently opposes those who criticize the holy books of other religions. He categorically asks his followers: Do not say that

the Vedas, the Bible and the Qur'an are false. Those who do not contemplate them are false. Guru Arjan says :

“Neither am I Hindu nor Musalman
This body and spirit is of Allah-Rama”

He also asserts:

“Say Nanak! The Guru removeth delusion,
Only Allah is *Parbrahman*.”

This indicates, he had tremendous respect for Allah, Rama and *Parabrahman*, in other words, he loved both the religious traditions in the same spirit.

The principle which underlies the pattern of *Guru Grantha Sahib* is that every Sikh gives the same reverence to the Sikh *Gurus* which he gives to the other 30 holy writers of this sacred text. A Sikh bows to the *Guru Grantha Sahib* and recites the *bani* of all the writers included with same devotion and respect. It may be noted here that in the Golden Temple as well as in all other historical or local *Gurudwaras*, the hymns of all these Saints, *Gurus* and *Sufis* of India are sung. The followers of the *Guru Grantha Sahib* pay homage to Muslim and Hindu saints of India, recite their writings with equal amount of faith, reverence and devotion. This is not so and cannot be so in any other religion of the world.

Guru Nanak strongly pleaded for an egalitarian society where all people could be regarded as equals. In order to eradicate caste distinction and the social stratification based on caste system he created two institutions: *Sangat* and *Pangat*. *Sangat* is the community congregation where all people sit together for divine contemplation and prayer and *Pangat* is the free kitchen where different people irrespective of their caste and creed sit on the same platform and dine together. The distinction between poor and rich is forgotten, because all share

the same food at the same place. This was, indeed, a revolution against the inegalitarian society. A successful revolution without a single drop of blood. These *Sangat* and *Pangat* not only promote egalitarianism but also promote and enhance interfaith understanding. Let me give an example of the *Gurudwara* inside Dhaka University campus. In Bangladesh there is not a single Sikh citizen. Even after that on every Friday in this *Gurudwara* hundreds of people belonging to different religious background attend *Sangat* and join *Pangat* and these are promoting interfaith understating in this country. Not only in Bangladesh where there is *Gurudwara*, particularly in Europe and America, the *Sangat* and *pangat* have enriched the prestige of the Sikh community and helped to promote inter-religious harmony.

Guru Nanak argues that if God is one, then all the souls coming from Him are same in essence. The natural corollary of monotheism is oneness of humanity. All the *gurus* regarded the whole of mankind as an organic unity and repudiated the distinction on mundane plane. They held that the distinction of colour, language or territory cannot and should not form the ground for the claims of superiority of one group over the other. Guru Nanak strongly emphasized the highest common factor in all the religions of his time existing side by side but unfortunately clashing with one another. He conceived the idea of a new type of scriptures, formed a wholesome approach and attitude towards the fellow religions and philosophical schools. He provided directions for religious co-existence, philosophical accommodation and social integration. As we have mentioned above that Guru Nanak did not believe in the false barriers of religions and rigidities of caste. Some scholars hold that he was an ideal Muslim among the Muslims and a model Hindu among the Hindus. He believed in the fatherhood of God and

brotherhood of man and he not only propagated this philosophy but also practiced this vigorously in his life.

Universalism is a cardinal value of Sikhism. It is not bracketed with a particular ethnicity or a particular region. The whole earth has been revered by Guru Nanak as “mother earth” and as a result he did not believe in any promised land or holy land. Sikhism is universal because its primary essential concerns: social, political, cultural and economic are of a universal nature, embracing humanity as a whole. Guru Govind Singh held that God cannot be bound to a particular creed, place or era. He (God) cannot be bracketed with any particular ethnicity. Indeed, He is the Lord of all the peoples of the world. This makes Sikhism a universal religion in the strict sense of the term.⁷

There are many rules for inter-religious dialogue. The most important of them are stated below:

The purpose of inter-religious dialogue is to learn, that is, to change and grow in the perception and understanding of the truth and act accordingly. (2) Each participant must come to the dialogue with complete sincerity and honesty. (3) Each participant must come to the dialogue with no preconceived perceptions or assumptions. (4) Dialogue must take place only between and among equals as far as their eagerness to promote peace. (5) Dialogue must take place only on the basis of mutual respect and trust. (6) Dialogue demands that the participants must learn to be self-critical of themselves and their faith traditions. (7) All participants eventually must attempt to experience their partner’s religion from within.⁸ If one goes through the *Guru Grantha Sahib* one will see that these rules are directly or indirectly stated to be followed seriously and religiously.

There are some other important assumptions and preconditions for interreligious dialogue. (a) We should not make any hasty value judgments of our own religions as well as on other religions. (b) We should not make any hasty distinction or indulge in any kind of over-simplification and generalization. (c) We should recognize both differences and similarities. (d) We must set the houses of religions in order, i.e., we must practice what we preach, and we must preach what we practice. (e) We must have to avoid thinking that our religion alone is true and the rest are false. (f) We should entertain the same amount of respect for all faiths. (g) We should be committed to dialogues even in agreeing to disagree on some points. When such an attitude becomes the law of life, the conflicts on religious differences will disappear from the earth and peace on the earth is bound to prevail.⁹ It may be mentioned here that no sacred text on the earth has ever spoken of the assumptions and preconditions of interreligious understanding as deeply and as profoundly as the *Guru Grantha Sahib* did. That is why it is rightly said that the *Guru Grantha Sahib* is a role model for interfaith understanding.

In today’s pluralistic world, the teachings of the *Guru Grantha Sahib* can play a vital and constructive role. Sikhism not only acknowledges and appreciates other faiths but also accepts their validity and integrates the world life with the idea of divinity. The *Guru Grantha Sahib* seeks to unite people belonging to different faiths and holds that the object of religion is not to divide mankind, but to unite them, not to act like scissor and tear asunder the social fabric, but to act like a needle and sew it together. In today’s world we must feel that we all are members of one great family of beings, having different forms of working. We must remember that we are all marching towards the spiritual realizations of truth and love. Some common man in ignorance says, ‘My religion is the only

one, my religion is the best'. But when his heart is illumined by true knowledge, he knows that above all these wars of sects and sectarians presides the one invisible eternal all-knowing bliss. In fact, the different faiths are like spokes of a wheel in which God forms the hub. Therefore, let us – all the religionists – radiate towards that hub and find peace and solace. *Guru Grantha Sahib*, I am quite confident, can be a guiding force in this regard.

Let me conclude with the observations of former Indian President A.P.J, Abul Kalam and former Indian Prime Minister Dr. Manmohan Singh:

The cherished and noble values of *Guru Grantha Sahib* should inspire all of us to follow the message of love compassion, unity brotherhood of man and supremacy of God, the Almighty. Respect for religions has also been preached by this Holy Book, a message relevant in today's world.¹⁰

The teachings of the *Guru Grantha Sahib* seek to harmonize the world as we know it. These teachings synthesize the essential wisdom of all the religions and earlier mystic saints and the ancient traditional cultural and civilizational ethos of the Indian people. In doing so, it sets out a powerful and appealing message of gender equality, concern for women and concern for our natural environment. It defines a moral compass for humanity to follow, but without adopting an imperative approach. Most of all, it sets out an agenda for social equity that is most relevant for our society today.¹¹

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