Sikhs and Dialogue: The Place of Dialogue in Sikhism: 'As Long as We are in this World, O Nanak, We Should Listen and Talk to Others'

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Abstract: In the 'one world' of today the various religious traditions are consciously interacting with each other in mutual observations and dialogue. Religious pluralism reflects the situation of the simultaneous existence in a single social arena of several different worldviews that are often considered incompatible with one another. It has always been a fact of life, but its awareness has become more evident in recent times than before because of the process of globalisation. As part of this process the world is now witnessing the breaking of cultural, racial, linguistic, and geographical boundaries. In the early decades of sixteenth century, Guru Nanak (1469-1539), the founder of the Sikh tradition, encountered the leaders of different religious persuasions and tested the veracity of his own ideas through dialogue with them. He proclaimed: '*As long as we are in this world, O Nanak, we should listen, and talk to others*' (GGS, 661). For instance, his dialogues with Nath adepts are recorded in his celebrated *Siddh Goṣṭ* in the Sikh scripture (GGS, 938-946). His travels exposed him to diverse cultures and societies that helped him evolve his unique lifeworld. A distinctive feature of the *Ādi Granth* (Original Scripture) is that it contains the compositions of fifteen non-Sikh poet-saints (*Bhagat Bāṇī*) from both Hindu and Muslim backgrounds, along with the compositions of the Sikh Gurus. The Sikh scripture upholds genuine respect for the plurality of identities, ideologies, and practices. Exploring a four-point theory of religious pluralism

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and the issues of inter-religious dialogues, the essay will focus on the lived realities and broadly contemporary realities of adherents of Sikhism.

Keywords: Bhagat Bāṇī, Goṣṭ, Guru Granth Sahib, Intertextuality, Religious Pluralism, Sikh Inclusiveness

Introduction

Geographically and culturally, Sikhism originated more than five centuries ago in the Punjab ('five rivers') region of north-western India, a frontier zone where interaction between different segments of the society and cultures of the Middle East, Central Asia, and India was commonplace. It was rooted in the religious experience, piety, and culture of that period and informed by the unique inner revelations of its founder, Guru Nanak (1469–1539), who declared his independence from the other schools of thought in his day. He kindled the fire of autonomy and courage in his first disciples (*Sikhs*) who gathered around him at Kartarpur (Creator's Abode), a village which he founded in 1519 on the right bank of River Ravi. His creative ideas and strategies triggered the process of institutionalisation in the early Sikh tradition during the last two decades of his life. His specific ethical formulations based on the fundamental values of 'truth, love, humility, justice, and equality' became a viable model of a new social organisation beyond the grip of the hierarchical caste system in India. Guru Nanak's rejection of the prevailing orthodoxies of both Islamic and Hindu tradition provided an alternative spiritual paradigm that became the basis of social reconfiguration according to divinely sanctioned normative principles.

The very survival of Guru Nanak's message over many generations and historical periods is a testimony to its unique qualities of continued relevance. Based initially on religious ideology, the distinctive Sikh identity was reinforced with the introduction of distinctly Sikh liturgical practices, ceremonies, holy sites, and the compilation of an authoritative scripture in 1604 by the fifth Guru, Arjan (1563–1606), who played an extremely important role in this process of crystallisation of the Sikh tradition. The ideology based upon ethical values and cultural innovations of Guru Nanak and his nine successors ultimately was the first of three main elements on which the evolution of the Sikh tradition depended. The second was the rural base of Punjabi society, comprising mainly peasantry with its martial traditions. The third significant element was the period of history of Punjab during which the Sikh tradition evolved in tension with Mughals and Afghans in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. All these three elements combined to produce the mutual interaction between ideology and environment in the historical development of the Sikh religion.

The primary scripture of the Sikhs is the *Ādi Granth* (Original Book), commonly referred to as the *Gurū Granth Sāhib* ('Honorable Scripture as Teacher') to reflect its authoritative status within the Sikh community (Panth) as the living embodiment of the Guru. For Sikhs, it succeeded the tenth Guru, Gobind Singh (1666–1708), who terminated the line of personal Gurus before he passed away in 1708, installing the Sikh scripture as 'Guru Eternal for the Sikhs', along with the collective body of the Khalsa to make decisions considering its teachings. The Gurū Granth Sāhib (GGS) has always been the perennial source of guidance for Sikhs on moral discernment, and it is treated with the most profound respect when it is installed ceremonially in a *gurdwārā* ('Guru's house,' the Sikh place of worship) to preside over the congregation. The formation of the *Ādi Granth* text, and its transformation into scripture, illuminates trajectories of production, circulation, and dissemination from orality to manuscript to print, from the place of its origin into the world, granting its special place in the world literary sphere. Given the global presence of the Sikh community due to large-scale migration, it is a text with worldwide readership, providing ethical guidance on contemporary issues in response to changing historical contexts and local situations in India and the diaspora. It is the principal source of inspiration for its adherents to participate in inter-religious dialogues in the contemporary world.

Dialogue in Sikhism

In his autobiographical hymn, Guru Nanak claimed to have had a mystical experience, a transforming event which marked the beginning of his spiritual reign to preach the message of the divine Name (GGS, 150). It was 'an authentic tradition concerning a personally decisive and perhaps ecstatic experience, a climactic culmination of years of searching in illumination and in the conviction that he had been called upon to proclaim divine truth to the world' (McLeod 1968, 107). Guru Nanak was then thirty years of age, had been married to Sulakhani for more than a decade and was the father of two young sons, Sri Chand, and Lakhmi Das. Yet he left his family behind to set out on a series of journeys to both Hindu and Muslim places of pilgrimage in India and abroad: 'I have seen places of pilgrimage on riverbanks, including shops, cities, and market squares. I have seen all nine regions of the world, weighing as a merchant the merits and demerits of each place in the scale of my heart' (GGS, 156).

During his travels he visited the whole of India, Sri Lanka, Central Asia, and the Middle East. He reminisced later that his foreign travels took place in accordance with the divine will: 'When it pleases You, we go out to foreign lands; hearing news of home, we come back again' (GGS, 145). On his journeys Guru Nanak en-

countered the leaders of different religious persuasions and tested the veracity of his own ideas through dialogue with them. His travels exposed him to diverse cultures and societies that helped him evolve his unique lifeworld. The authenticity and power of his spiritual message ultimately derived not from his relationship with the received forms of tradition but rather from his direct access to Divine Reality through personal experience. Such direct access was the ultimate source of his message, which provided him with a perspective on life by which he could fully understand, interpret, and adjudicate the various elements of existing traditions. He conceived of his work as divinely commissioned, and he required that his followers must obey the divine command (*hukam*) as an ethical duty.

In the early decades of the sixteenth century, therefore, Guru Nanak interacted with diverse religious traditions of Hindu, Muslim, and Nath-yogi origins. He was strongly opposed to an exclusive claim that a particular tradition might make to possess the sole religious truth. He acknowledged the use of different names of the Divine across religious boundaries: 'What can poor Nanak say? All the people praise the One Lord. Nanak's head is at the feet of such people. May I be a sacrifice to all Your Names, O Eternal One!' (GGS, 1168). In his mystic vision, the saintly people of all continents enjoy the 'Realm of Grace' (*karam khaṇḍ*): 'They know eternal bliss, for the True One is imprinted on their minds, hearts, and souls' (GGS, 8). Such people speak with the 'authority and power' of the divine Word. Guru Nanak proclaimed: '*As long as we are in this world, O Nanak, we should listen, and talk to others*' (GGS, 661).

In his conversations with the religious leaders of various communities, he maintained that all participants must enter a religious dialogue with an open attitude, an attitude which allows not only true understanding of other traditions but also disagreements on crucial doctrinal points. This would mean to agree to disagree without being disagreeable. This ideal is stressed in his dialogues with Nath adepts recorded in his celebrated *Siddh Goṣṭ* in the Sikh scripture, where he is urging the Nath-yogis to answer the question without any feeling of offence: 'Listen to my prayer, O Master, and impart unto me the true insight. Please do not be offended and answer my query. How can one reach the portals of the True Master?' (GGS, 938). Indeed, the spirit of appreciation and accommodation had always been an integral part of Guru Nanak's attitude towards other religious traditions. Nevertheless, he frequently denounced the contemporary fake religious leaders as hypocrites for the way in which they divorce moral conduct and religious practice. This double focus must be maintained to appreciate Guru Nanak's response to religious pluralism of his day (Singh P. 2020a, 24–28).

Religious Pluralism and the Bhagat Bāṇī in the Ādi Granth

Religious pluralism is a phenomenon that refers to the coexistence of many religions in the society where we live and our reaction to that fact. It reflects the situation of the simultaneous existence in a single social arena of several different worldviews that are considered incompatible with one another. It has always been a fact of life, but it has become more evident in recent times because of the process of globalisation. As part of this process the world is now witnessing the breaking of cultural, racial, linguistic, and geographical boundaries. Notably, a glimpse of religious pluralism may be seen in the *Ādi Granth*, which contains the compositions of fifteen non-Sikh poet-saints from both Hindu and Muslim backgrounds, along with the compositions of the Sikh Gurus. Most of these compositions were first introduced in the evolving Sikh scriptural tradition during the period of the third Guru, Amar Das (1479–1574). Later, Guru Arjan extended the precedent of the third Guru and made the *Bhagat Bāṇī* (utterances of medieval poet-saints) part of the first authoritative text in 1604. This was done in the historical context of the Mughal emperor Akbar’s rule (r. 1556–1605).

In a sense, Akbar was a true pluralist who was born a Muslim but who married a Hindu wife. His curiosity about other religions led him to build the ‘House of Worship’ (*Ibādat-khānā*) at Fatehpur Sikri, where interreligious discussions were held among scholars of all the major religions. He used to preside over these debates, which resulted in the formation of his own syncretistic religion, *Dīn-i-Ilāhī* or ‘the Divine Religion,’ aimed at the unification of Hindu and Muslim thought. However, Akbar’s pluralism must be understood as part of the large process of state formation in Mughal India. His liberal approach was much despised by his more aggressive co-religionists. For instance, Emperor Aurangzeb (r. 1658–1707) imposed increasingly restrictive policies of Sunni orthodoxy that included enforcement of Islamic laws and taxes and sometimes the replacement of local Hindu temples by mosques (Singh P. 2019, 211).

The inclusion of the *Bhagat Bāṇī* in the foundational text of the Sikh tradition is, therefore, historically linked with a genuine experiment in religious pluralism in India in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries. Although the effect of this experiment did not last long after Akbar’s death, perhaps we can draw some inferences from this original impulse and develop a theory of pluralism that may be useful in present-day interfaith dialogues. The evidence of the *Bhagat Bāṇī* certainly underscores the point that some forms of religious expressions from outside the tradition were meaningful enough for them to be preserved along with the composi-

tions of the Sikh Gurus themselves. The case of the *Bhagat Bāṇī* may thus offer the following four-point theory of pluralism in the context of interreligious dialogue, worship, and prayer.

1. The quest for self-identity

The presence of the *Bhagat Bāṇī* in the Ādi Granth has been variously interpreted throughout Sikh history. The original emphasis was on the process of self-definition that is traceable to the writings of the Sikh Gurus, particularly their comments on the works of the Bhagats. These comments illuminate the historical context of dialogues and debates between different religious groups in sixteenth- and early seventeenth-century Punjab. They provide the answer to the all-important question of what it means to be a Sikh in relation to the commonly held Sant, Sufi, or Bhagat ideals. In his comments on the verses of Shaikh Farid, for instance, Guru Nanak made the assertion that a life of spirituality is a matter of divine grace, which occupies the position of primacy over personal effort. Guru Nanak was quite explicit in stating his own belief in the doctrine of rebirth as opposed to the Sufi belief in the bodily resurrection on the Day of Judgment. Similarly, Guru Amar Das provided a contrast to Kabir's view of self-withdrawal by defining the Sikh view of action-oriented life in the world. Thus, the Sikh Gurus were deeply concerned about cultivating a particular Sikh lifeworld by way of commenting on and editing the received tradition of the *Bhagat Bāṇī* (Singh P. 2003, 55, 61–63, 100)

In a religious dialogue, therefore, one must acknowledge that all religious traditions have gone through the process of self-definition in response to changing historical context. Therefore, the protective attitude adopted by an emerging religious community must be contextualised as part of the process of building self-esteem in the early experience. It may become defensive in the face of persecution. It is an inevitable part of life and must be considered in interreligious encounters. Thus, the dignity of individual participants must be maintained in a dialogue since no one would like to lose their identity. That is, one must be able to honour one's commitment as absolute for oneself and at the same time respect the different absolute commitments of others.

2. Respect for differences

In the first place, the process of the integration of the Bhagat Bāṇī into the Ādi Granth was based upon the recognition of two major points: first, its harmonisation with the Gurus' thought in broad outlines; and second, highlighting of its differences from the Gurus' thought at essential points. Let us take the case of the Sufi poet, Shaikh Farid, who remained an orthodox Muslim in his lifetime. He is allowed to express his Muslim beliefs and practices freely in the Ādi Granth. Notably, his

works containing such beliefs as the resurrection, the flaming hell, the *pul sirāt* (‘bridge of hell’), and the terrible retribution for the unbelievers have not received any direct comment from the Gurus. When Sikhs read these passages, they immediately accept them as part of Muslim beliefs and practices, although their own belief system is based on the notion of reincarnation. The presence of Shaikh Farid’s *bāṇī* (‘inspired utterances’) in the Ādi Granth promotes the sense of mutual respect and tolerance for diversity of belief and practice. Only those aspects of the Farid-*bāṇī* have received direct comments from the Gurus that concern general attitudes towards life, divine grace versus human effort, asceticism, and the mystical dimensions of spiritual life.

Secondly, the basic idea of revelation in the Sikh tradition is based upon the rich concept of *shabad* (‘sacred sound’) in Indian thought. Accordingly, the Bhagats had the experience of the divine truth that they proclaimed in verbal form (*shabad*) in their compositions. Their inclusion in the Sikh scriptural tradition follows naturally from the Sikh doctrine of universal *bāṇī* that appears perpetually in all ages in the works of the Bhagats. Although the idea of universal/pluriversal *bāṇī* has a wider application, each case of revelation is a partial manifestation of the divine intention in a specific cultural context.

Thirdly, the titles at the beginning of Bhagat Bāṇī section in each *raga* of the Adi Granth employ the honorific particles *jīu* and *jī* with the names of the poet-saints (*Rāgu Āsā Bāṇī Bhagatān Kī: Kabīr Jīu, Nāmdev Jīu, Ravidās Jīu*). These titles show that all the Bhagats shared a common status because they were all adjudged to have spoken the divine Word and confirmed as such by the Sikh Gurus. This convention of honorific particles is not used anywhere else in the Ādi Granth with the names of any Sikh bards or even with the Gurus themselves. This convention shows the utmost regard with which the hymns of the Bhagats were included in the Sikh scripture.

Finally, doctrinal standpoints of different religious traditions must be maintained in mutual respect and dignity. In a family, the acceptance of differences in the context of mutual respect and appreciation can be a powerful catalyst for good. Thus, any attempt to play down differences or to obliterate them completely through some intellectual exercise for the sake of creating a superficial unity in the form of some world religion will not help in the process of building a tolerant society. Durable peace comes only if we acknowledge that the plurality of religious expressions adds to the beauty and wonder of this world in much the same way as different colours of flowers of different plants add to the beauty of a garden (Singh P. 2020b, 95–96).

3. Openness in a dialogue

An 'open attitude' means a willingness to co-exist, to learn from other traditions, and yet to retain the integrity of one's own tradition. In this context, there is a danger lurking behind this attitude, however, for one's urge to be open to all may cause one to lose one's cultural bearings, and openness can degenerate into religious synthesis, or to a wishy-washy lowest common denominator sort of religious experience. Therefore, an open attitude must allow not only true understanding of other traditions but also disagreement on crucial doctrinal points. The presence of the writings of non-Sikh poet-saints in the Ādi Granth is thus an eloquent testimony to the open attitude of the early Sikh tradition. Although the early Sikhs were open towards others, they were open selectively and with caution. They expressed their caution through the process of engaging in dialogue with the texts of the poet-saints to highlight the points where the Gurus and the Bhagats differed. For instance, let us look at the Guru Nanak's comment on Shaikh Farid's verse that stresses extreme self-torture:

> My body is oven-hot; my bones burn like firewood. If my feet fail me, I will walk on my head to meet my Beloved. (Shaikh Farid, Salok 119, GGS, 1384)

Shaikh Farid's ascetic discipline seems to have taken the extreme form of self-torture. The ideals of self-torturing and asceticism which find expression in Farid are diametrically opposed to Guru Nanak's emphatically stated beliefs of moderate living and disciplined worldliness. He severely condemns those wandering ascetics who 'harm themselves by burning their limbs in the fire' (GGS, 1285). His commentary verse rejects the ascetic streak of Farid and emphasises self-realisation instead of self-torture:

> Do not heat your body oven-hot, burn not your bones like firewood. What harm have your head and feet done? (So, why do you torture them through such austerities?) Rather behold the Beloved within your soul, Farid! (M1, *Salok* 120, GGS, 1384)

The Guru clearly provides a contrast to Shaikh Farid's view by asserting that one must seek the divine Beloved within one's own heart without torturing the body through ascetic discipline. The Guru thus places a positive value on the human body that should be used as an instrument of spiritual realisation and service to humankind. In his comment on Farid's verse, Guru Nanak shows himself concerned to define for his own followers a path that excludes asceticism as described by the Sufi poet. Thus, all participants must enter a dialogue with an 'open attitude' which allows not only true understanding of other traditions but also disagreements on cru-

cial doctrinal points. This would mean to agree to disagree without being disagreeable (Singh P. 2020b, 96–98). In her paper 'Shaikh Farid in Adi Granth: Religious Identity and Inter-Religious Dialogue,' Sarah Khan has made an important observation on the Sikh Gurus' comments on Shaikh Farid: 'The overall encounter of interjections demonstrates the Gurus' readiness, ability, openness to, and etiquette of dialogue beyond their own identity, and their principle-based rather than polemical criticism upon concerns they deemed crucial, and carried out that dialogue with unqualified respect' (Khan 2016, 27).

4. Mutual transformation

In the give and take of interreligious dialogue, as Diana Eck argues, understanding one another leads to mutual self-understanding and finally to mutual transformation: 'To recognise this plurality of religious claims as a profoundly important fact of our world does not constitute betrayal of one's own faith' (Eck 1993, xii, 14). Religious pluralism acknowledges that 'various religions offer rather different solutions to human problems and, indeed, that they also recognise different problems' (Doniger 1991, 231). In this context, Wendy Doniger aptly remarks, 'When we live in a world where others exist, we become better. We can reflect on what is other and use the other as a catalyst to our own creativity' (Ibid., 232). Not surprisingly, the case of the *Bhagat Bāṇī* has proved the validity of this point in the way certain verses of the poet-saints that received direct responses from the Gurus sharpened the process of Sikh self-definition. The *Bhagat Bāṇī* has had a tremendous impact upon the people of Punjab for the last four centuries. Indeed, the 'other' must somehow become one's 'self' in a dialogue so that one's life is enriched with that spiritual experience. This assumption may be justified from the fact that the *Bhagat Bāṇī* is already an integral part of the Sikh tradition.

Lived Realities of Sikh Participation in Dialogues in the Contemporary World

Let us now turn to the lived realities and broadly contemporary global Sikh community's active involvement in interreligious dialogues and selfless service. It is true that much of the foundational scholarship in the field of Sikh studies has followed historical and textual approaches, sometimes to the extent of softening the focus on Sikh practices, performances, and every day 'doings' of Sikh lives. The growing turn in the academic study of religion toward 'lived religion,' however, calls scholars to be aware that 'religions' are at least as much about the things people 'do' as about the ideas, ideals, and central narratives enshrined within their texts and scripture. Rather than dichotomise text and practice, this essay draws attention to the intersections between Sikh sacred texts and actual practices of the Sikh community around the

world. According to the teachings of the Gurus (*gurmat*, Gurus' doctrine which is a living practice at the same time), the key element of religious living is to render service (*sevā*) to others in the form of mutual help and voluntary work. This is the only way to engage with others by sharing one's resources of 'body, mind, and wealth' (*tan-man-dhan*). This is an expression toward fellow beings of what one feels toward *Akāl Purakh* ('Eternal One,' God). The Sikh congregational prayer (*Ardās*) reaches its climax with a universal longing for the 'welfare of all' (*sarbat dā bhalā*) when it ends with the standard mandatory couplet, 'Nanak says: May your Name exalt our spirits with boundless optimism, and in your grace may peace and prosperity come to one and all'.

Here, I would like to cite some living examples of Sikh openness toward other faiths. In 2002 a four-hundred-year-old mosque, *Gurū Kī Masīt*, built by the sixth Guru, Hargobind (1595–1644), for his Muslim devotees, was handed back to the Muslims after fifty-five years (BBC 2002). The Sikhs had preserved the shrine as its custodians for the Muslim brethren after the Partition of the country in 1947 in much the same way as the Ādi Granth has preserved the works of Shaikh Farid. It should, however, be emphasised that the building of the mosque for the Muslims and a temple, *Hanuman Mandir*, for Hindus, by the sixth Guru at his own expense, must be seen as part of the pluralistic discourse of his times. Following this noble example of their Guru, Sikhs are always ready to open their gurdwaras for the people of other faiths to worship in their own way. On 20 August 2012, for instance, 'about 800 Muslims offered *Eid* prayers at a gurdwara in Joshimath in Uttarakhand on Monday after incessant rainfall prevented them from praying at a ground which they normally used for prayers in the absence of a mosque there' (Gopal 2012). Similarly, the first gurdwara built in 1912 at Stockton in California was the 'Model of Interfaith' where Sikh, Hindu, and Muslim immigrants from pre-partition India used to worship together at weekends. Over the next three decades the Khalsa Diwan Society of Stockton hosted Hindu and Muslim spiritual leaders alike to build support for the Indian freedom struggle, especially those involved with the Ghadar movement (Balaji 2015). For Sikhs, all sacred spaces in both private and public spheres deserve equal respect and dignity. They enthusiastically participate in ecumenical gatherings around the world. In this regard the Nishkam Sevak Jatha of the United Kingdom is at the forefront of interreligious dialogues, including interfaith worship and prayer (Singh P. 2019, 213).

An integral part of Sikh worship is the institution of the community kitchen (*laṅgar*), the inter-dining convention that requires people of all castes and creeds to sit in status-free lines (*paṅgat*) to share a common meal. In fact, the establishment of a community kitchen at Kartarpur in the early decades of the sixteenth century was the first reification of Guru Nanak's spiritual concerns to reorganise the society on

egalitarian ideals. In this setting of the partaking of food in caste-conscious India, anyone could be sitting next to anyone else, female next to male, socially high to socially low, and ritually pure next to ritually impure. The institution of the community kitchen promoted the spirit of unity and mutual belonging and struck at a major aspect of caste, thereby advancing the process of defining a community based upon Sikh ideals. In plain ritual language, this egalitarian human revolution proclaimed explicitly that there would be no discrimination of high caste or low, no male or female, no Muslim or Hindu, no Sikh or non-Sikh.

More recently, the Guru Nanak Darbar Gurdwara in Dubai hosted 120 Muslim residents of over thirty nationalities to celebrate the holy month of Ramadan and support the Muslim community in breaking their fast in a multicultural setting. As the call to *Maghreb* prayers rang inside the Sikh place of worship, Muslims broke their fast over water, dates, *Rooh Afzā* milkshake and Indian dishes of *dāl* served with naan bread, paneer, and biryani, followed by *ras malāī* for dessert. Later, they offered their *Maghreb* prayers inside the Sikh temple, facing the *Qiblā* direction, in Jebel Ali. For the Year of Giving, the Sikh temple held the Guinness World Record for serving a free continental breakfast titled 'Breakfast for Diversity' to the largest number of people from diverse nationalities (Zakaria 2017). Notably, the Sikh community kitchen (*laṅgar*) fed thousands of the 2015 Parliament of World Religions at Salt Lake City, Utah. It is no wonder that representatives of other faiths remarked that the *laṅgar* was the perfect message of 'Inter-Faith and Oneness' (see Figure 1). For Willi-

Figure 1: Thousands partook in a free langar meal on Saturday, Oct. 17, 2015, during the Parliament of the World's Religions. Copyright: Antonia Blumberg/THE HUFFINGTON POST

am Hwang, an educator who lives in San Diego, the *laṅgar* was more than a shared meal: 'It was a form of spiritual fellowship that feeds your body and feeds your soul' (Blumberg 2015).

Earning one's living through honest means and sharing a portion of one's earnings with the needy while expressing gratitude through meditation on the divine Name constitute a good economic life in the Sikh tradition. The most recent crisis of the COVID-19 pandemic has brought Sikh ethical values to the fore at the global level. In a recent article Dipanker Gupta writes that routinisation of *sevā* primes Sikhs to help others: 'People from distant Croatia and Syria acknowledged the help Sikhs gave them during their nightmare moments, and neither did US hesitate to rename New York's 101 as Punjab Avenue to honour the contribution of the Sikhs to the city'. He goes on to cite the service done in India:

> From providing oxygen, to ambulatory service, to feeding the poor, the Sikhs are nearly always the first to help. Even when relations quail to pick up a Covid corpse, Sikh volunteers willingly and unhesitatingly come forward. (Gupta 2021)

The spirit of giving of our time in selfless service (*sevā*) certainly influences our level of economic and social power. In addition to sacred religious practices, economic exchanges contain opportunities for meaningful relationships and the sharing of traditions, including knowledge and wisdom in dialogue (Biondo 2012, 327). The key institution of the *laṅgar* is best understood in terms of a gift-economy, following the sociologist David Cheal, who sees gift-giving as the 'institutionalisation of social ties within a moral economy' (Singh and Waraich 2020). It sets into motion the act of *sevā* – with the gurdwara forming the backbone on which such selfless service becomes operative. More recently, it has transformed itself into the new forms of 'Food Bank' and 'Oxygen *Laṅgar*' to provide free food and oxygen to the people suffering from the COVID-19 pandemic. The sovereign Sikh principle behind this selfless service is the 'victory of the free kitchen and the sword' (*degh tegh fateh*), providing food and justice for all while fighting against social inequities and economic disparity. Sikh economic ethics promote the circulation of wealth to increase initiative and opportunity, thereby promoting stewardship and philanthropy to eradicate poverty (Singh P., forthcoming). The work done by international Sikh organisations such as Khalsa Aid and United Sikhs is noteworthy for providing food, medicine, and humanitarian aid to the victims of natural and man-made disasters such as floods, earthquakes, famine, and war around the world. Following the Sikh teaching of the 'well-being of all' (*sarbat dā bhalā*), these NGO organisations reach out to those in need, regardless of race, religion, and borders (Khalsa Aid & United Sikhs). In this

context, author Jasreen Mayal Khanna writes for the BBC, addressing the question of why Sikhs celebrate kindness:

> From Rohingya crisis in Mynamar to the Paris terror attack, the farmers' marches in India to the protests in America against George Floyd's killing, people from this 30 million-strong community worldwide have made it a tradition to help complete strangers in their darkest moments. (Khanna 2021)

This kind of selfless service is possible only when the 'other' becomes one's 'self' in mutual understanding in dialogue, enriching the life of the society at large through the process of sharing and caring.

Personal Experiences of Participating in Interfaith Dialogues

In this section I would like to narrate my personal experiences as a participant-observer in interfaith dialogues in the 1980s sponsored by the Canadian Council of Christians and Jews, the University of Calgary Chaplain, and the federal secretary of state of the government of Canada. I was a graduate student at the University of Calgary and a resident-Granthi (Reader) at Guru Nanak Centre of Sikh Society, Calgary. My professor, Harold G. Coward, who had written a book on *Pluralism: Challenge to World Religions* (1985), was the force behind this movement of interreligious dialogues in Canada at that time. Bob Bettson, a reporter of the *Calgary Herald*, covered the first interreligious gathering at the University of Calgary, in which I represented the Sikh community, along with John Friesen, representing the Christian Churches, Leona Anderson, a religious studies specialist in eastern religions, and Mehmett Alaittin Hastaoglu, representing the Turkish Muslim community in Calgary.

The dialogue had its lighter moments, in which I was asked about the Sikh custom of wearing a 'dagger.' I decided the best way to illustrate my point was to produce my *kirpān* (miniature sword) before the audience, explaining that this so-called 'dagger' is a 'religious symbol, not a weapon' (Bettson 1985, G11). I focused on the actual meaning of the Punjabi term *kirpān* derived from 'grace' (*kirpā*) and 'dignity' (*ān*), becoming an article of faith, and a living practice among the Sikhs, initiated into the Order of the Khalsa, bound by common identity and discipline. For me, this interreligious dialogue provided an opportunity to remove the misconceptions about a religious symbol. For Fritz Voll, regional executive director of the Canadian Council of Christians and Jews, the dialogue was an important step toward religious understanding and tolerance. The ideas discussed in the meeting included meetings of

spiritual leaders of Calgary religious groups, gatherings of lay people for continuing dialogue, sharing of facilities and services, encouragement of religious education efforts and the setting up of an office for interreligious projects (Ibid.).

Further, Professor Coward frequently argued that religious traditions are either mutually exclusive or inclined to absorb one another in the way an amoeba will surround and ultimately ingest any morsel that comes along. For him, toleration of one another's religious practices and interfaith dialogue aimed at giving us a clearer view of each other's religion are vital in the name of decency and world peace: 'In all religions, there is a basis for looking positively at other religions' (Tait 1986a, B6). Here, I would like to share my own observations that I made before an audience of Christians, Muslims, and Hindus, at an interreligious dialogue at Renfrew United Church, organised by the Calgary branch of the Canadian Council of Christians and Jews:

> Let us resolve at this meeting that we will give equal dignity to all traditions…Tolerance does not demand compromise or pretence that agreement exists where it is absent. We have to agree to disagree at times. Why not? Real tolerance comes when we disagree without being disagreeable. (Tait 1986b, F18)

I was trying to explain how the Sikh tradition developed in northern India amidst the competing claims of the Hindu tradition and Islam. Guru Nanak was not attempting to melt down all faiths into one common denominator: 'Rather, he was offering a new approach of mutual understanding and tolerance by accepting the validity and co-existence of other faiths. Sikhism is strongly opposed to an exclusive claim which a particular religion might make' (Ibid.). I continued to underscore the significance of interfaith dialogue as 'an occasion to look beyond our immediate circle and realise that there is a deep current of spirituality that runs through all religious traditions and is the sole possession of none' (Ibid.). Mark Tait's report of the event in *Calgary Herald* was based upon the excerpts from my speech.

Furthermore, a five-day Canadian Christian Festival was organised on May 15–19, 1986, at Stampede Grounds in Calgary (Alberta), designed to bring together Christians of all denominations. It attracted internationally known speakers, including Nobel Peace Prize winner Betty Williams from Northern Ireland, evangelist Leighton Ford, and Brazilian Roman Catholic Bishop Dom Hélder Câmara – viewed by many as one of the fathers of liberation theology. This interdenominational event was sponsored by the coalition of churches like Presbyterian, Lutheran, United, Roman Catholic, Anglican, and the Salvation Army to stress the ideal of 'Our Common Journey in Faith,' growing in awareness of God at work in the world, through the varied traditions. Dozens of daily discussion groups covered a variety of

topics from Bible interpretation to the role Christians should take in the political struggles around the world (Tait 1986c, A1–A2).

A unique feature of the Canadian Christian Festival was the introduction of interreligious workshops in which speakers from Jewish, Hindu, Muslim, Sikh, Buddhist and Bahai traditions participated. It was an honour for me to represent the Sikh community of Calgary in the festival. My interlocutor David J. Goa and I were in actual dialogue in which I was responding to his probing questions about the significance of the five mandatory outward religious symbols of Five Ks – (1) *kes* (unshorn hair, symbol of preserving the original form and affirming the laws of nature), (2) *kaṅgā* (wooden comb, symbol of tidiness and cleanliness, affirming the householder's life), (3) *kirpān* (miniature sword, symbol of justice, honour and dignity, signifying the right to bear arms along with the moral duty to protect all life), (4) *kaṛā* (iron wrist-ring, symbol of loyalty and discipline, signifying one's being bound within *hukam* or divine Order), and (5) *kachhairā* (short breeches, symbol of sexual morality, signifying the need for restraint). These five symbols act as psychological channels to reflect the faith and discipline of Khalsa Sikhs, who become the walking advertisement of their visible identity by wearing them along with a turban (in the case of male Sikhs). The interfaith audience raised the question of whether Sikh women also wear these outward symbols to which the answer was in the affirmative in the case of those female Sikhs who were initiated into the Order of the Khalsa. Most of Sikh women belonging to the Akhand Kirtani Jatha, Nihangs and the Sikh Dharma of North America also wear turbans in addition to the Five Ks to stress the egalitarian ideal.

Finally, I want to point out one serious flaw in modern-day interfaith dialogues in which religious apologists frequently make exclusive claims without trying to truly understand the viewpoints of others. They feel good because they could represent themselves at these gatherings to enhance their own political agenda. Here, I would like to give an example of a published volume on *Interfaith Worship and Prayer* edited by Christopher Lewis and Dan Cohn-Sherbok. I have contributed to this volume along with Nikky-Guninder Kaur Singh and her student Lucy Soucek to write a combined chapter on Sikhism. When I received my copy in the mail and looked at the contents of various chapters in a cursory manner, I was stunned at the photograph inserted in the chapter on Zoroastrianism written by Jehangir Sarosh. The author himself took the picture of a larger circle of prayer event in the United Kingdom. One-third of the participants in that gathering were visibly Sikhs wearing their turbans, but the caption excluded them completely: 'Christians, Hindus, Jews, Zoroastrians and Muslims creating a large circle of prayer' (Sarosh 2019, 127). The author did not even try to acknowledge the participation of Sikhs in the interfaith gathering. More recently, my graduate student Nicole LeWallen has completed her

MA thesis on 'World Parliament of Religions 1893 and the Systematic Exclusion of the Sikhs' at the University of California, Riverside. She has concluded her arguments on the exclusion of the Sikh tradition from this major event of 1893 as follows:

> The Sikh tradition was excluded from the event. They were not excluded because the tradition somehow failed to meet the prerequisite of 'Religion,' but because the Sikh faith could not be used to make Christian tradition appear more desirable. The Sikh tradition, with its monotheistic beliefs and strong ethical codes, would have appeared as a genuine rival to Christianity. The Sikh tradition could not be considered superstitious, romantic, dangerous, or exotic. If an Indic tradition was not those things, then what would Christians compare themselves to? Therefore, the Sikhs *had* to be excluded because they posed a genuine threat to the belief that Christianity was supreme and true religion. Out of fear, they were written into a historical silence. That silence enveloped the Sikh faith for over a century. During that time, Americans remained largely ignorant of the Sikh faith. (LeWallen 2022)

To make a conscious or unconscious attempt to exclude any community, native people, or marginal groups by 'othering' them so that they are left without the ability to find their voice works against the main objectives of interreligious dialogues. It is only through love, service, and understanding that we can spiritually connect with others and make a commitment to the ideals of equity, inclusion, and social justice.

Conclusion

The Gurū Granth Sāhib, rather than being a monochromatic hymnal containing a set of ideologically compatible compositions, becomes something much more dynamic – a text in which Sikh Gurus not only espouse specific doctrines but also engage in active exchange with their precursors. Here, we have offered a four-point theory of religious pluralism based upon the examination of the presence of the *Bhagat Bāṇī* in the Sikh scripture. First, one must acknowledge that all religious traditions have gone through the process of self-definition in response to changing historical context. Thus, the dignity of the various religious identities of individual participants must be maintained in a dialogue. In other words, one must be able to honour one's commitment as absolute for oneself while respecting the different absolute commitments of others. Therefore, the quest for a universal religion and likewise the attempt to place one religious tradition above others must be abandoned. Second, the doctrinal standpoints of different religious traditions must be main-

tained in mutual respect and dignity. Third, all participants must enter a dialogue with an 'open attitude' which allows not only true understanding of other traditions but also disagreements on crucial doctrinal points. Finally, the 'other' must somehow become one's 'self' in a dialogue so that one's life is enriched with that spiritual experience.

Notwithstanding the emphasis on a protective Sikh attitude (which at times becomes militant defence of the tradition in the face of persecution), the spirit of accommodation has always been an integral part of the Sikh attitude towards other religious traditions. Any change in the religious and political situation calls for a new response to religious pluralism, not only in the Punjab but also from the diaspora Sikhs, who continue to face new situations as immigrants in other countries. Thus, each generation of Sikhs has responded to the question of self-definition in the light of its own specific situation. In fact, they rediscover their identity in cross-cultural encounters as well as their living context of interreligious dialogues. The *Bhagat Bāṇī* in the Sikh scripture provides an excellent example of catholicity that promotes mutual respect and understanding of diversity of belief and practice. For instance, Shaikh Farid is allowed to have his Muslim voice in terms of doctrine and practice. Unsurprisingly, modern-day Sikhs stress this ideal frequently in interfaith dialogues. The *Bhagat Bāṇī* illuminates fascinating instances of inter-textual dialogues that may be useful to the study of cross-cultural encounters. It can also offer its distinctive contribution to the study of human interaction in a rapidly growing era of globalisation (Singh P. 2019, 215).

In the 'one world' of today the various religious traditions are consciously interacting with each other in mutual observation and dialogue. It should be emphasised that the ability to accept religious pluralism is a necessary condition of religious tolerance. Religious pluralism provides the opportunity for spiritual self-judgement and growth. It requires that people of different faiths live together harmoniously. In the multicultural and multi-ethnic societies of the post-modern world, where stress is being placed upon liberty, diversity, tolerance, and equality of race and gender, Sikh ideals are thoroughly in place and congenial to the developing values of a pluralistic society. Sikhism is dedicated to human rights and resistance against injustice. Its existential commitment is towards the ideal of altruistic concern for humanity (*sarbat dā bhalā*) as a whole. The Gurū Granth Sāhib celebrates colourful diversity when it accepts the fact that many voices explore the deeper aspects of religious truth in their own way. The plurality of religious expression, therefore, deepens our own sense of wonder and commitment. In fact, the Sikh scripture offers a vision of common humanity, and points the way to looking beyond the barriers of caste and creed, race and gender. It stresses Guru Nanak's foundational message of

transcending the constructs of 'Hindu' or 'Muslim,' and, by implication, of 'Christian,' 'Jew,' 'Buddhist,' 'Jain' and indeed 'Sikh.

Acknowledgments

All the citations from the *Gurū Granth Sāhib* are taken from the standard version of the 1430-page text. For instance, 'GGS, 150' refers to the citation on page 150 of the standard volume. The code word 'M' (or *Mahallā*, meaning 'King') with an appropriate number is used for the Sikh Gurus in the Sikh scripture.

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