

**KEYNOTE ADDRESS**  
**INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE**  
**FORMULATING METHODOLOGY FOR**  
**INTERPRETING GURBANI**  
 September 21, 2013 Montreal, Canada  
**Dedicated to Centennial Anniversary of**  
**Max Arthur Macauliffe (1841-1913)**

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Chahal**



The Centennial Anniversary of Max Arthur Macauliffe (1841-1913) is passing away unnoticed in India and also in the West although anniversaries of some *sants* are celebrated every year regularly in Gurdwaras and at various *Dehras* with great pump and show. However, first conference to celebrate the Centennial Anniversary of Macauliffe was held by Prof Brian Bocking on March 15, 2013 by theof Religions Department, School of Asian Studies of University College Cork, Ireland with the generosity of the Sikh community in Ireland through the Cork University Foundation (2). I am not aware of any other celebration in India or elsewhere. Macauliffe was the first scholar who observed that there was a lot of diversity in interpreting the Sikh scriptures among the various theologians of his time. Therefore, *The Institute for Understanding Sikhism* is dedicating this International Conference: *Formulating Methodology for Interpreting Gurbani*, being held today on September 21, 2013 at Montreal, Canada to celebrate his Centennial Anniversary with the objective that some Standardized Methodology for Interpreting Gurbani can be formulated as a guide to achieve interpretation of Gurbani in its real perspective.

Macauliffe was born on September 10, 1841 at Newcastle West, county Limerick, Ireland. In 1862, he was appointed to the Indian Civil Service in the Punjab. In 1882 he was appointed as Deputy Commissioner. During his assignment in Punjab the focus of his life was to work as translator and interpreter of Sikhism for the English speaking world. His first work on Sikhism appeared in *Calcutta Review* in articles published during 1875-1881.

His phenomenal work of translating the Aad Guru Granth Sahib (AGGS) and writing definitive history of Sikhism could not be carried out along with his responsibilities of Civil Service. In 1893 the Khalsa Diwan offered him financial Assistance thus he resigned from lucrative Civil Service. He worked at Amritsar and at Nabha where Bhai Kahn Singh was assigned to him for help by Raja Ripuduman Singh of Nabha. The work on, *The Sikh Religion: Its Gurus, Sacred Writings and Authors*, was completed in 1909. The other professional scholars, besides Bhai Kahn Singh as the chief, who helped Macauliffe were: Bhai Nihal Singh and Sant Singh of Sialkot; Bhai Ditt Singh, Gurmukh Singh, Rajinder Singh and Nihal Singh of Lahore; Bhai Sardul Singh Giani, Prem Singh, Fateh Singh and Darbara Singh of Amritsar; Bhai Sant Singh of Kapurthala, Bhai Bhagwan Singh of Patiala and Dasaudha Singh of Ferozpur (14 in number). The proofs of his final work were read by Bhai Kahn Singh, Diwan Lila Ram, Bhai Shankar Dayal, Bhai Hazara Singh, Bhai Sardul Singh, Bhai Ditt Singh, Bhai Bhagvan Singh and others from 1901-1903 (4). He returned to England with Bhai Kahn Singh to make this work ready for press. Six volumes were published by Clarendon Press in Oxford (4).

In his Preface to the above book Macauliffe declared that “*I bring from the East what is practically an unknown religion. The Sikhs are distinguished throughout the world as a*

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great military people, but there is little known even to professional scholars regarding their religion.”(6) This is a very important point worth to be noticed that after about 364 years of Guru Nanak the Sikhs were known as military people and Sikhi founded by Guru Nanak was not known properly even to professionals and was not practiced by the Sikhs. With regards to Sikhi practiced during his time (1882-1909), Macauliffe observed (6):

“Notwithstanding the Sikh Gurus’ powerful denunciation of Brahmans, secular Sikhs now rarely do anything without their assistance. Brahmans help them to be born, help them to wed, help them to die, and help their soul after death to obtain a state of bliss. And Brahmans, with all their the deftness of Roman Catholic missionaries in Protestant countries, have partially succeeded in persuading the Sikhs to restore to their niches the images of Devi, the Queen of Heaven, and of the Saints and gods of the ancient faiths.”

It becomes evident from the above observations of Macauliffe that original Sikhi founded by Guru Nanak was lost within 364 years after Guru Nanak (from 1539 to 1903 - the time when Macauliffe finished his research on Sikhism).

It is a pity that in spite of the following facts about Guru Nanak as observed by Macauliffe the Sikhs continued to follow Brahmans rather than the Sikhi of Guru Nanak:

“Guru Nanak was not a priest either by birth or education, but a man who soared to the loftiest heights of divine emotionalism, and exalted his mental vision to an ethical ideal beyond the conception of Hindu or Muhammadan.”(6)

And he continued to describe Guru Nanak’s contributions as:

“Now there is here presented a religion totally unaffected by Semitic or Christian influence. Based on the concept of unity of God, it rejected Hindu formularies and adopted an independent ethical system, ritual, and standards which were totally opposed to the theological beliefs of Guru Nanak’s age and country.” [(60) p-LIV] On contrary to the above observation Sikhi (Sikhism) is being equated by Sikh and non-Sikh authors to Hinduism and Islam and now also to Christianity in general writings on Sikhism as well as on Interfaith Conferences being held throughout the world.

Although he took the help from all expert theologians of that time still he noticed that their opinions were often widely at odd with one another. At times this situation caused him anxiety, slight annoyance, irritability and distress (4). Strange is the nature of some Sikh theologians even today that they must

disagree with the other theologian’s interpretation of Gurbani. Macauliffe’s thinking, about different opinions among Sikh theologians, was further confirmed when his work has been widely acclaimed by the Sikh community but there were other *gianis* who could call the whole thing into question: “I have met so-called gianis who could perform tours de force with their sacred work, and give different interpretations of almost every line of it.” (4) According to Prof Nikki Gurinder Singh, Macauliffe was so much frustrated that he reported in *Asiatic Quarterly Review*, 1898 at page 365 as following (2): “Had I known earlier the difficulties I should have to encounter, I should certainly never have undertaken a translation of this description,”

Under these circumstances one can easily imagine how difficult it would have been for him to represent right biographies of Sikh Gurus and proper interpretation of their writings. The difficulties met by Macauliffe for interpretation of Gurbani and representation of Sikhism in its real perspective appear to be discouraging continuously to the dedicated Sikh scholars since then. That is the reason that we do not have an interpretation of the AGGS in its real perspective till today as most of the interpretations are based on the prototype exegesis called *Faridkot Vala Tika*, which is based on Vedic and Vedantic philosophies. And no scholar has tried to go against the basic concepts given in that *Tika*.

According to him the problems to understand Sikh religion were that the hymns of the Aad Guru Granth Sahib (AGGS) were written in Persian, mediaeval Prakrit, Hindi, Marathi, old Punjabi, Multani and several dialects. In several hymns Sanskrit and Arabic vocabularies are freely drawn upon. There were no dictionaries of the Aad Guru Granth Sahib or sacred books of the Sikhs when Macauliffe commenced his work. He also noticed that there were hardly about ten expert theologians and none was capable of giving an English interpretation. They generally construed in tedious paraphrases in their own local dialect (6). Macauliffe’s work is the first interpretation of Sikh scriptures in English, which has become a prototype for further translations of the Aad Guru Granth Sahib (AGGS) in English by various authors.

After this work Macauliffe contributed articles on Sikhism to the 11<sup>th</sup> Edition of *Encyclopaedia Britannica* and continued to interpret Sikhism to both popular and scholarly audience by lectures and articles. He passed away on March 15, 1913 in London home, Sinclair Gardens, West Kingston. He was attended by a Punjabi servant, Muhammad, who reported that Macauliffe recited *Jap (Ji)* shortly before he breathed his last. Prof Tadhg Foley reported at the Centennial Conference held to honor Macauliffe that he was deeply interested to Sikhism and it appears he was converted to Sikhism (2).

Macauliffe failed to gain support from India and from the Punjab Government and all his work was supported by his own funds and support and financial help from Sikh Rajas and prominent rich Sikhs. “*Macauliffe’s translation will remain a basic witness to the meaning of the Guru Granth Sahib.*”(4) On the other hand Trumpp, a German missionary linguist, was retained by the India Office to translate Sikh scriptures. His work appeared in 1877 but was widely repudiated by the Sikh Community as an inaccurate and misleading (4).

However, before all the above efforts to translate/interpret Aad Guru Granth Sahib by Trump and Macauliffe in English, the first exegesis of the Aad Guru Granth Sahib in Punjabi was completed in 1883 by Bhai Badan Singh Sekhvan, one of the Nirmalas trained from School of Vedas and Vedanta at Varanasi, about 26 years before that of Macauliffe’s work in English (8). Since the Nirmala School generally echoed the *Udasi* trend of interpreting Sikh scriptural texts in the inflated style prescribed by Hindu commentators on Upanishadic and Vedic texts (1), therefore, it appears that all those advisors of Macauliffe might also be under the influence of Nirmalas during the last 26 years of Nirmalas. Under these circumstances Macauliffe’s work in English cannot be declared free from the influence of Nirmalas’ thought.

According to Ashok (1) it was Guru Gobind Singh who had deputed five Sikhs -Karam Singh, Vir Singh, Ganda Singh, Saina Singh and Ram Singh – for training at Varanasi, the Hindu learning center. They returned Anadpur as accomplished scholars of classical Indian theology and philosophy. After vacating Anadpur in 1705, the Nirmala preachers went to different places outside the Punjab. They believe in 10 Sikh Gurus and Aad Guru Granth Sahib but Baptism and wearing of 5 Ks were not compulsory for them. They were traditionally inclined towards classical Hindu philosophy especially Vedanta. After well establishing themselves outside Punjab, they came back to Punjab and took over the control of almost all the Gurdwaras and Sikh institutions.

If we look into the way Sikhi (Sikhism) is being preached and practiced today it confirms the statement of Macauliffe made during 1893—1899 (6): “*Hinduism has embraced Sikhism in its folds; the still comparatively young religion is making a vigorous struggle for life, but its ultimate destruction is, it is apprehended, inevitable without State support.*” It is widely accepted that Jainism and Buddhism, which do not believe in the concept of God, flourished very well in India because of support of the state. In spite of the fact that there is no God, now many gods have been introduced into these two religions and original principles of their

philosophies have also been lost. Jainism has become a minority in India and is hardly found in rest of the world. On the other hand Buddhism has also become a minority in India; however, it is still progressing in rest of the world especially in the East.

Since the observation of Macauliffe Sikhi founded by Guru Nanak is declining steadily without being noticed by the custodians of Sikhi. The major cause in decline for Sikhi is that Gurbani has not been interpreted in its real perspective so far. Professor Puran Singh was the first researcher after Macauliffe who noticed misinterpretation of Gurbani during 1920s:

*“It is to be regretted that Sikh and Hindu scholars are interpreting Guru Nanak in the futile terms of the colour he used, the brush he took; are analyzing the skin and flesh of his words and dissecting texts to find the Guru’s meaning to be the same as of the Vedas and Upanishads! This indicates enslavement to the power of Brahmanical tradition. Dead words are used to interpret the fire of the Master’s soul! The results are always grotesque and clumsy translations which have no meaning at all.”* (9)

The above observation of Prof Puran Singh also remained un-noticed for at least 77 years as is evident from the study of Prof Taran Singh, the then Head of the Department of Sri Guru Granth Sahib Studies, Punjabi University, Patiala that although there have been eight different **Explanatory Schools of Aad Guru Granth Sahib** (*Viakhia Parnalian*), which have been working right from Bhai Gurdas to Maherban (Sodhis) to Sadhu Anand Ghan to Nirmalas and Samparday (Santokh Singh and *Faridkot Vala Tika*) to that of modern theologians like Prof Sahib Singh’s *Tika* and many other *tikas* prove that philosophy of Sikh Gurus was not different than that of Brahmanical and Vedic philosophies. He further stressed that although it appears that universities have taken good steps, their research could only establish that the truth in the Aad Guru Granth Sahib is not different than the truth of ancient India. Nevertheless, he acknowledges it as a ‘powerful achievement’(11). Now a question arises about 409 years after the compilation of the Aad Guru Granth Sahib:

**Can a standardized methodology be formulated for an ‘authentic’ Interpretation of Gurbani?**

Current literature indicates the paucity in the availability of a precise and comprehensive methodology for interpreting Gurbani. An exception is the formulation of Grammar of Gurbani by Professor Sahib Singh (10). Professor Chahal (3) has attempted to discover the methodology used by Guru Nanak from his Bani and it has been described in Chapter 6, *Nanakian Methodology* of his book, *Nanakian*

*Philosophy: Basics for Humanity*. Gurnek Singh (7) has noticed difficulties in interpreting Gurbani because of: “*The religion is based on the experience of the metaphysical reality i.e. God or Numinous. This experience is the result of the direct encounter or the communication with this reality. As a consequential effect it comes down to us through non-rational media i.e. the intuition which is beyond intellectual understanding and comprehension. So being the product of direct vision of the ultimate reality i.e. God, it intellectually is both unapproachable and not understandable because the language through which the Bani or revelation is coming down to humanity is most of the time symbolic, metaphorical and allegorical.*” On the other hand Inderjeet Kaur (5) is of the opinion that: “*In the modern world, where the science and technologies are rapidly developing thereby effecting a change in the thinking and attitude of the people. In order to meet the new challenges, the interpretation of the scripture thus became necessary.* Some other writers have mentioned some sort of methodology to interpret Gurbani.

Therefore, the Institute for Understanding Sikhism (IUS) is holding this International Conference for “*Formulating Methodology for Interpretation of Gurbani*” at Montreal, Canada on September 21, 2013. Some members raised their eyebrows when holding such type of conference was announced for the first time at the Sikh Translation Group and Gurmat Learning Zone at Internet Yahoo Groups. By and by some papers started to pour in. Now 8 papers were presented in one-day conference and about 8 more unread papers are to be considered for inclusion in proceedings of the Conference. I wish all success to all these scholars who are presenting their research papers to achieve some success to initiate the process for formulating Methodology for interpreting Gurbani.

### ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The author is grateful to Dr Kulbir Singh Thind, Pioneer of Gurbani CD, Dr Opinderjit Kaur Takhar, University of Wolverhampton, UK. Dr Avtar Singh Dhaliwal, USA, and Dr Harjeet Singh Bhabra, Associate Dean, Concordia University, Montreal for their valuable suggestions and looking into the manuscript.

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