

## CHAPTER BY IUS ON BIOETHICS

### *Sikh Perspectives on Bioethics*

by Prof Devinder Singh Chahal

#### IN: ANNALS OF BIOETHICS

#### RELIGIOUS PERSPECTIVES IN BIOETHICS

John F Peppin, Mark J Cherry, and Ana Iltis (Editors)

Taylor & Francis, The Netherlands, Leiden, London and New York  
ISBN 90 265-1967 2

*Religious Perspectives in Bioethics* illustrates the diverse and wide-range moral intuitions, premises, evaluations, and commitments of many of the world's religions. As such, it explores, documents and critically assesses the moral and cultural assumptions, central beliefs and values, and epistemological and metaphysical understandings that underlie the bioethics of a wide range of religions, from Buddhism, Daoism, Hinduism, and Sikhism, to Islam and Judaism, to the various Christian religions, including Eastern Orthodox, Roman Catholic, Lutheran, Episcopal, Southern Baptist, and Reformed Protestant. *Religious Perspectives in Bioethics* portrays the often widely divergent bioethical perspectives reflected throughout the international community's religions and cultures. Here one appreciates the significant plurality of fundamentally different, incompatible, and often mutually antagonistic moral visions and moral rationalities, within which complex bioethical issues are addressed.

The authors were asked to provide something of a uniform structure in their commentaries. Thus, most of the contributors set out, at least in summary fashion, the theological motifs and methodological principles at work in the traditions they survey, as well as commentary on many or all of the following topics: concerns with professionalism and the doctor-patient relationship; reproductive issues, including contraception, abortion, as well as issues raised by genetics and cloning; issues in death, dying, and end-of-life care; moral and political discussions concerning access to health care and the reform of health care delivery; procedural and substantive issues raised by the practice of ethics consultation and the functions of ethics committees; and other topics of current concern.

The *Institute for Understanding Sikhism* was approached by Dr John F Peppin, Director, Center for Bioethics, Pain Management & Medicine, Des Moines, Iowa for

writing a chapter, *Sikh Perspectives on Bioethics*. Prof Devinder Singh Chahal, President of the IUS and the Editor-in-Chief of *UNDERSTANDING SIKHISM – The Research Journal*, accepted this challenge and contributed this chapter for the *Annals of Bioethics*, which forms one of the chapters in the said volume, *Religious Perspectives in Bioethics* (pp 211-220).

In this chapter Prof Chahal says that Sikhism, founded by Guru Nanak during the 15<sup>th</sup> century, is one of the youngest, most scientific, and most logic-oriented religions of the world. Although it originated before the results of dramatic changes in science, technology, economics, and psychology yet influenced culture, Sikhism rejected the myths found in existing religions. Guru Nanak also challenged most of the religious and social laws the priestly class and ruling parties had developed to control the peoples of south Asia.

In light of the challenges Sikhism poses to ancient traditions and rituals, its approach to bioethics ought to be distinctive. However, very little has been written on bioethics from the Sikh perspective. What has been written generally does not give reference to Sikh religious texts or authorities. For example, Sahni (Sikh Review) has written on religious faith and modern medicine, and IJ Singh has written on science, religion and bioethics in a Sikh journal (Sikh Review) without giving any reference to the Sikh religious text or Sikh approach to bioethics. Moreover, no reference to the Sikh perspective on bioethics from any Sikh religious authorities in India is available.

From Balambal's report we can infer that the development of bioethics in Sikhism remains indistinctive because the Indian Constitution groups Buddhism, Jainism, and Sikhism with Hinduism. Whenever bioethical issues arise, they are discussed in terms of Hinduism, Islam, Christianity, Judaism,

Zoroastrianism, etc. without reference to the Sikh perspective. This is in part the fault of Sikh religious authorities that have, for the most part, remained silent on issues in bioethics. Abortion of female fetuses and infanticide, *sati* (self-immolation by a wife in the funeral fire or pyre of her husband), and genital mutilation are the exceptions. For the most part, however, the primary concern of Sikh religious authorities has been on the importance of maintaining an external physical identity for the Sikhs.

This chapter may be the first discussion of bioethics from the Sikh perspective in which the views presented are supported by quotations from a religious text, the *Aad Guru Granth Sahib* (AGGS).

Prof Chahal has handled bioethical issues entirely according to principles of Nanakian philosophy embodied in the *Gurbani*, which has been incorporated in the *Aad Guru Granth Sahib* (AGGS). Nanakian philosophy emphasizes critical thinking and analysis. This is central to understanding its approach to bioethics. The most important characteristic of Sikhism is that one must evaluate each act or choice by asking whether it is good for an individual life or for humanity. If it is, then

one should pursue it: “One must evaluate the things/philosophy, if convinced, then adopt/follow it” (AGGS, M1, p. 1410). In order to do this, one must use one’s intellect to distinguish between good and bad, true and false, right and wrong, etc: “Those who have discriminating intellect can understand things in their real perspective” (AGGS, M5, p. 285). To formulate positions on issues in bioethics, therefore, one must use one’s discriminating intellect to evaluate practices and uses of technology. Finally, it has been emphasized that it is important to do research to resolve mysteries and obscure phenomena before formulating any ethical code: “The researcher progresses while the other (discursive and aimless) perishes, (Nanak) sacrifices himself on the Guru, the Creator” (AGGS, M1, p. 1255).

This volume, *Religious Perspectives in Bioethics*, of *Annals of Bioethics* is worth reading for all the researchers and doctors involved in bioethics where one can find bioethics perspectives of each religion. This is the first time that *Sikh Perspectives on Bioethics* have been discussed as an independent religion from Hinduism at the world level. The Institute for Understanding is proud of its achievements.

## THE INHERITED TREASURE

ਪੀਊ ਦਾਦੇ ਕਾ ਖੋਲਿ ਡਿਠਾ ਖਜਾਨਾ ॥ ਤਾ ਮੇਰੈ ਮਨਿ ਭਇਆ ਨਿਧਾਨਾ ॥  
 ਰਤਨ ਲਾਲ ਜਾ ਕਾ ਕਛੂ ਨ ਮੋਲੁ ॥ ਭਰੇ ਭੰਡਾਰ ਅਖੁਟ ਅਤੋਲੁ ॥  
 ਖਾਵਹਿ ਖਰਚਹਿ ਰਲਿ ਮਿਲਿ ਭਾਈ ॥ ਤੋਟਿ ਨ ਆਵੈ ਵਧਦੇ ਜਾਈ ॥  
 ਕਹੁ ਨਾਨਕ ਜਿਸੁ ਮਸਤਕਿ ਲੇਖੁ ਲਿਖਾਇ ॥ ਸੁ ਏਤੁ ਖਜਾਨੈ ਲਇਆ ਰਲਾਇ ॥

AGGS, M 5, p 186.

*As the inherited treasure (Gurbani) of our ancestors (Gurus) was opened and viewed, then the mind was illumined with Treasure (Gurbani).*

*Compared to this treasure the jewels and rubies have no value.*

*The chest is full of inexhaustible and immeasurable treasure (Gurbani).*

*Let us utilize it together, and dispense (disseminate) it amongst others.*

*The Treasure (Gurbani) will not be exhausted instead  
 it would multiply many folds.*

*Nanak says whosoever has the Grace of the Almighty will be a  
 shareholder of this Treasure (Gurbani).*