

FAITH AND REASON IN RELIGION

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ABSTRACT

An attempt has been made to delineate the role of faith and reason in religion, an attempt that will probably fall short of scholarly standards. Still it is hoped that as a result of this paper some discussion will be generated and some intelligent sense made of the issue. It is clear to me that whilst a great deal of any religious belief relies on faith alone, there has to be some point beyond which such faith must be supported by reason. From the Sikh viewpoint reliance on mere faith stops, or should stop, after the acceptance of the existence of God and of the teachings in the Aad Guru Granth Sahib; any issue outside of this has to be open to intelligent discussion and to change where necessary.

INTRODUCTION

Is religion a matter of faith or reason?

Are the two incompatible?

Does one have priority over the other?

If both are necessary, where does one end, and the other take over?

These and similar questions often occupy the minds of those who want to believe, but whom reason advises otherwise. Many issues of religion make no 'reason-able' sense. This paper is an attempt at defining the role and/or limitations of the two in relation to Sikhism.

Faith

A belief in the existence of God is the first and most important 'leap' of faith that a 'religious' person makes. A fact that must be accepted, if this discourse is to have any meaning, is that a belief in the existence of God is based on faith alone. God cannot be reasoned into existence no matter what the arguments. One can try to 'rationalize' the belief in the existence of God but cannot 'prove' Its existence; 'reason', as used by ordinary people, demands that the existence of God be proven. The existence of God, therefore, has to be 'given' if the discussion is to proceed.

The role of faith in religion does not end there. Many of the dogmas of any religion will require heavy doses of faith. A comparison between the Judeo-Christian-Islamic tradition (Middle-Eastern Tradition) and the Indian Tradition (Hindu, Sikh, Jain, etc) will help to illustrate. The Middle-Eastern Tradition believes in a Heaven and Hell, in Resurrection and a Day of Judgment, after death. The Indian Tradition, on the other hand, believes in reincarnation and the cycle of births and deaths and finally a release from this cycle. Obviously both traditions cannot be 'right' (though it is logically possible

that both may be wrong); neither is it possible to prove any one Tradition 'right' by use of reason. In each case the belief has to be taken on faith alone. There are those who subscribe to fideism. They affirm the priority of faith (fides) over reason and hold that religious belief systems are not ultimately subject to rational evaluation.

The other extreme (strict rationalism) holds that in order for a belief system to be properly and rationally accepted, it must be possible to prove that the belief system is true. (Here prove means 'to show that a belief is true in a way which is convincing to any reasonable person.' [4]). One would be hard put to convince either party as to the importance, or truth, of the other's stance. For most ordinary individuals, however, faith is important up to a point, beyond which some reason must prevail.

To begin with, a belief in any religion is based on faith alone. Most have no difficulty with faith when they see the 'awesomeness' of the world around them and of the Universe; they cannot believe that there is no Creator for all this. They feel there has to be a 'purpose' to our life and to all Creation. These are matters 'spiritual' and those who believe cannot be convinced about the non-existence of a Creator. Subscribing to a religion also requires a faith in its preceptor or founder, and in the Scriptures of the religion. The preceptors (founders) of the faith are Divinely-inspired men (and women) and the 'Revelation' (scripture) has to be taken on faith, since it is a 'revelation' only to those who receive it first-hand; for the rest of us (followers) it is 'hearsay' (many times over) and has to be believed on faith alone. When one claims to be a Sikh one unequivocally states that one has faith in the existence of One God, faith in the teachings of the Ten Gurus (from Guru Nanak to Guru Gobind Singh), and faith in the Aad Guru Granth Sahib (AGGS), the

Holy Scripture of the Sikhs. In the final analysis it is a profession of faith in God and in the AGGS.

Thus it is clear that 'faith' plays a major role in any religion; without faith there can be no God or religion. Most 'believers' have no problems accepting 'spiritual' matters and certain dogmas on faith alone. The quarrel arises when the clergy, or other, usually self-appointed, 'guardian' of the faith, tries to enforce 'un-reason-able' rules and regulations, unrelated to 'spiritual' matters, upon the laity, all in the name of religion or God. It is when religion begins to dictate our mode of dress, what we can or cannot eat, the manner in which we have to behave in relation to scriptures, etc, without providing a rational basis for those demands that we refuse to accede to those demands. Today, more than ever, any religious 'control' over us must appeal to reason or must accept rebellion and refusal instead. For the Sikhs (at least for this writer) the main question of faith ends with the belief in God and the AGGS. Beyond that, any rule, regulation or dogma must stand to reason if it is to be followed or enforced. Admittedly, any organization, and the Sikh Panth is an organization, will need some rules or a Code for it to function as a unit. That the imposition of some of those rules will, quite naturally, be objected to by some is not unexpected. The disagreement should not, however, result in 'excommunication', and yet, that precisely is what happens when any thinking member of the Sikh Community questions any pronouncements of the 'pontiffs' of the faith.

It is necessary to reiterate that this paper will contend that a Sikh, having accepted the existence of God and the truth of spiritual matters as contained in the AGGS on faith, has a right to demand a reason-able explanation for any religious requirement not covered by the AGGS but made in the name of the faith, has a right to be consulted on matters that affect him, a right to be heard without any fear of 'excommunication'.

Reasoning

It is worth remembering: "About the only point of agreement amongst the various scholars of Sikhism is the authenticity of the verses in the Aad Guru Granth Sahib (AGGS) [1]. Its uniqueness as a scripture, in that we still possess the original copy signed by Guru Arjan, makes it the most important reference material for the study of Sikhism. Any fundamental concept, dogma, ritual or supposed episode in the lives of the Gurus must be in consonance with the teachings of the AGGS. Anything that conflicts with the scripture should be rejected. Of course there will always be issues that cannot be resolved by merely referring to the AGGS. It is in these areas that Sikh scholars will have to tread carefully." [7]

Equally, it means that issues on which the AGGS is silent are open to debate, and any rule enforced in the name of the faith must stand to reason if it is to be accepted by the Community. Even then it will mean that such rules will be amenable to change if the circumstances so require.

The AGGS exhorts Sikhs to first evaluate the philosophy and to accept it only if convinced:

ਪਹਿਲਾ ਵਸਤੁ ਸਿਵਾਣਿ ਕੈ ਤਾ ਕੀਚੈ ਵਾਪਾਰੁ ॥

AGGS, M 1, p 1410. [1, 2]

In Gurbani the "Highest importance is given on the deliberation and discussion on the sabd of the Guru".

ਸਭਸੈ ਉਪਰਿ ਗੁਰ ਸਬਦੁ ਬੀਚਾਰੁ ॥

AGGS, M 1, p 904.[1, 2]

Only those who have a discerning intellect can understand things in their real perspective.

ਬੂਝੈ ਬੂਝਨਹਾਰੁ ਬਿਬੇਕੁ ॥

AGGS, M 5, p 285. [1, 2]

And those who have a discriminating intellect are wealthy in knowledge:

ਸੋ ਧਨਵੰਤਾ ਜਿਸੁ ਬੁਧਿ ਬਿਬੇਕੁ ॥

AGGS, M 5, p 1150. [1, 2]

Thus, with the AGGS advising us to use our intellect and reason even in matters of accepting the philosophy of the Gurus, it does seem strange that our 'leaders' (Jathedars of the various Takhts and so-called sants) demand unquestioning obedience to their diktats.

Some Issues

So many rituals that are obviously against Nanakian Philosophy embodied in the Gurbani, incorporated in the AGGS, are being practiced by the Sikhs all over the world and these have been discussed before [5]; a further discussion of these will therefore be dispensed with. It is not the aim of this paper to enumerate those practices which, according to this writer, common sense and intelligent thought abhors. Nevertheless it may be worth pointing to some issues that need tackling at the 'highest' level:

1. Excommunications: A writer (Gurbaksh Singh Kala Afghana, in this case) was excommunicated by the Akal Takht Jathedar because he uses the AGGS as the touchstone and points out to the obvious defects in the book, *Gurbilas Patshahi 6* {...meeting of the Sikh clergy, held at the Akal Takht secretariat, unanimously resolved that Mr Kala Afghana had indulged in blasphemous activities and contents of his books were against the Sikh tenets [9]}. Even this in itself would not be reason for excommunication as no one, including the Akal Takht Jathedar, has any power or right to excommunicate any

Sikh according to Nanakian Philosophy. The newspaper goes on to report [9]: "In his last letter written to Giani Joginder Singh Vedanti, Jathedar, Akal Takht, Mr Kala Afghana had used derogatory language describing him as a 'liar' and 'maha pappi'. Taking serious note of the language used, Jathedar Vedanti said it was unpardonable." Assuming that Kala Afghana had indeed used intemperate language that would still not entitle the Akal Takht Jathedar and his cronies to excommunicate Kala Afghana. Perhaps the reason for the excommunication was the fact that the Akal Takht Jathedar had endorsed the book. The ease with which some of these Jathedars excommunicate people must end. Some of those who have been excommunicated in the past have been men of stature, firm and fair in their beliefs, refusing to let the Clergy run rough-shod over them; indeed one can almost wear the 'excommunication' as a badge of honor and distinction rather than of shame.

2. Langar Hukumnama: A non-issue that had already been deliberated upon, and decided upon, is unilaterally 're-decided' by the (then) Akal Takht Jathedar. The fact that no rule was being broken by allowing tables and chairs in the langar, that it was not against the philosophy in the AGGS, that common sense dictated that it was a harmless (useful even) practice, did not have any effect on the Akal Takht Jathedar. Till today every Gurdwara is divided over this issue. For those who would support the Akal Takht Jathedar's stand it is simply a question of blind obedience; they see no point in using their intellect.

3. Dasam Granth: We are, I believe, 'forbidden' to even bring up this issue, let alone intelligently discuss it. Why? Historians tell us that just prior to his demise Guru Gobind Singh made only the AGGS as the 'Eternal Guru'; he did not say that his own writings were to be accorded the status of Canon. What's more the overwhelming majority of the writings in the so-called Dasam Granth is not only not-in consonance with the AGGS but are downright vulgar. Most scholars are clear that these are not the writings of Guru Gobind Singh. Why are we disallowed from using our intellect to debunk, or prove correct, that the Granth indeed entirely contains Guru Gobind Singh's writings?

4. Ragmala: Much has been written about this by Sikh scholars and the controversy continues to rage; yet the issue has not only been left unresolved but remains out of bounds for discussion. Why? Are we to shut our minds forever just because most 'graduates' of the Sant Samaj disagree with the findings and logical reasoning of more learned scholars? All the other writings in the AGGS say something on one or more of the following: the attributes of God, about worship, justice, passion,

ethics, etc. They teach mankind valuable lessons. What does the Ragmala teach? To what divine attribute does it allude? It cannot be denied that 'The composition is not integral to the theme of the Guru Granth Sahib, and [that] it has little musicological or instructional significance.' [8].

5. Rehit Maryada: The 'Code' is obviously outdated and redundant in some areas. It needs revision. Yet any suggestion to that effect will have so many up in arms. Is the Rehit also divinely inspired? The Shiromani Gurdwara Parbandhak Committee (SGPC) initiated the preparation of the Rehit Maryada in 1927 and approved the final version only in 1945 [5]. This long process was necessary to allow Sikh scholars to deliberate on the sources that were used to formulate the Maryada; they rightly rejected those portions of the available rahitnamas, and other documents, that they considered out of harmony with the AGGS, and those that were considered inappropriate (politically incorrect, to use the current jargon). These scholars were not infallible and may well have incorporated in the maryada injunctions that are absurd by today's standards, needing expunging or modifications.

CONCLUSIONS

1. Whilst the role of 'faith' is undeniably important in religion, after that initial acceptance of religious truths based on faith there has to be a point beyond which reason must prevail over faith; if for no other reason then at least because [3]: 'Out of all of the sects in the world, we notice an uncanny coincidence: the overwhelming majority just happen to choose the one that their parents belong to. Not the sect that has the best evidence in its favor, the best miracles, the best moral code... when it comes to choosing from the smorgasbord of available religions, their potential virtues seem to count for nothing, compared to the matter of heredity. This is an unmistakable fact; nobody could seriously deny it.'
2. Having accepted Sikhism without question, by virtue of birth, it will not be enough for future generations to accept everything else that is demanded in its name without a sound, rational argument to support it. To prevent abuse of religion, intelligent, rational and compassionate dogmas, in harmony with the AGGS, become even more important, knowing that [3] '... people with full knowledge of the arbitrary nature of this heredity, somehow manage to go on believing in their religion, often with such fanaticism that they are prepared to murder people who follow a different one.' In the final analysis reason will prevail over faith - it must.

(Continued on page 16)

(Continued from page 47)

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