

CONCEPT OF GOD THE ULTIMATE REALITY IN SIKH RELIGION

ARTICLE

Hardev Singh Virk

Professor of Eminence (Honorary),
SGGS World University,
Fatehgarh Sahib (Punjab)
E-mail: hardevsingh.virk@gmail.com

INTRODUCTION

All religions claim that their prophet is unique and salvation is possible only by following the path shown by their prophet. The concept of God is also unique to each religious tradition. Most religions believe in One God, but in Hinduism, the number of demi-gods can go up to thirty-three crores (330 million). The description of God also varies in each religion. Some believe in an anthropomorphic God, while others believe in God beyond description. The methods to achieve God are also different in different religions. If there is only one God in the whole universe, then why is there so much conflict between different religions? Why do religious leaders fight over the superiority of their prophets and their traditions? This is the most complex problem and there are no simple solutions to it in sight. Interfaith dialogues are a step in the right direction to reduce the internecine conflicts between different religions. The scientific revolution may also help us in the unification process of religious traditions as it has done in science.

In the *Scientific God journal* [1], the views of 50 Nobel Laureates and 50 other great scientists who believe in God are given. Stephen Hawking is not among them, as he established theoretically that the creation of the Universe happened without the intervention of God. Many Scientists do not believe in a theological God but believe in a God of Spirituality. Sukhraj Dhillon [2] has a reason to believe in God of Spirituality: *“Instead of searching for God that is tangled up with violence and survival, today we should search for God of spirituality”*. Sukhraj opines, *“God is Energy or Energy is God”*. He developed his idea of God based on the Laws

ABSTRACT

The concept of God is unique to each religion. Guru Nanak, the founder of the Sikh religion, summed up his views on the nature of God in the opening stanza of Sikh scripture, Sri Guru Granth Sahib. Using the scientific analogy of the dual nature of matter and radiation to represent physical reality, we may ascribe transcendental and immanent nature to God to represent the Ultimate reality in this universe. This is a unique contribution of Guru Nanak. God is indescribable yet knowable and perceivable to anyone prepared to follow Guru Nanak's philosophy. The Sikh faith founded by Guru Nanak is strictly monotheistic in its belief system, as God has been represented symbolically through an icon, ੴ, pronounced as Ek Ongkar. SGGS uses metaphors of father, mother, and otherworldly relations to express love for God, which proves that the Sikh concept of God is also rooted in God the “Person.”

of Thermodynamics, which is scientific but ridiculous.

Bhai Harbans Lal [3] gives a description of anthropomorphic God: *“We call an anthropomorphic God a God concocted by clergy. This clergy-created God sits faraway in the heavens as a majestic human figure micromanaging the human affairs. Our houses of worship told us that humans must fear this God; otherwise, He will dish out punishments like pain, disease, and calamities; and after death we will live like suffering animals. Further, this God had to be searched and venerated. This God needed appeasement through clergy intermediaries”*.

He juxtaposes the God of Sikh religion conceived by Guru Nanak: *“Five centuries ago Guru Nanak began his mission by alerting people against this clergy-made God. Instead, he preached God as a virtual reality in all*

creation. [Guru Nanak depicted his God through an icon](#), ੴ, pronounced as *Ek ongkar*. Nanak prescribed a meditation on this icon along with the meaning behind it. He brought in a metamorphosis that transformed humans into gods (*devtas*):

ਜਿਨਿ ਮਾਣਸ ਤੇ ਦੇਵਤੇ ਕੀਏ ਕਰਤ ਨ ਲਾਗੀ ਵਾਰ ॥
Jin māṇas te devṭe kī'e karaṭ na lāgī vār.
He made angels out of men, without delay.

AGGS, M.1, p 462.

The purpose of this essay is to explore the concept of God, the Ultimate Reality, in the Sikh religion, one of the five major religions of the world. Our thesis will be based on Sri Guru Granth Sahib (SGGS), the Sikh scripture, and the Sikh theology derived from its basic concepts. We shall mostly rely on foundational principles of Sikhism preached by its founder, Guru Nanak.

DISCUSSION

Guru Nanak's Concept of God: Guru Nanak discarded the polytheism of Vedic *rishis* and rejected the hierarchy of gods and goddesses of Hindu faith. [The Sikh faith founded by Guru Nanak is strictly monotheistic in its belief system.](#) This means that God is believed to be the One and the sole Reality in the Universe, and there is no other entity worthy of worship. God in Sikhism is believed to be eternal. God alone is Timeless (*Akal*). Akal is one of the key concepts in Sikh spiritual thought introduced by Guru Nanak.

In the opening stanza of Japuji in SGGS, known as the commencing verse (Manglacharan or Moolmantar), Guru Nanak defines God or Ultimate Reality as follows:

ੴ ਸਤਿ ਨਾਮੁ ਕਰਤਾ ਪੁਰਖੁ ਨਿਰਭਉ ਨਿਰਵੈਰੁ ਅਕਾਲ ਮੂਰਤਿ ਅਜੂਨੀ ਸੈ
ਭੰ ਗੁਰ ਪ੍ਰਸਾਦਿ ॥

Ikᵒoaṅkār saṭnām kartā purakhḥ nirbhāᵒo nirvair akāl mūraṭ ajūnī saibhā'n gurparsād.

Guru Nanak's vision of God (Reality) can be translated allegorically as follows [4]: "*Reality is one and non-dual. Hence the Manglacharan [5] commences with the numeral 1 before 'Open Oora', which represents Existence or Being. It is followed by Satt(i) Naam which means the Supreme Reality is true and it is manifested in Truth, Existence and Being. The other features of Reality are its transcendence and immanence, creator person, without fear or hatred, beyond time and space, self-existent, transcendental cosmic spirit made manifest by grace of the Guru.*"

The first sloka of Japuji after Moolmantar elaborates further on the nature of Ultimate Reality. Reality or God was in existence before the commencement of creation and time during the epoch of cosmic void. God existed at the beginning of this universe, i.e., creation of space and time. God exists now and will also exist in the future (even when the universe is annihilated).

ਆਦਿ ਸਚੁ ਜੁਗਾਦਿ ਸਚੁ ॥ ਰੈ ਭੀ ਸਚੁ ਨਾਨਕ ਹੋਸੀ ਭੀ ਸਚੁ ॥੧॥

Ād sachḥ jugādḥ sachḥ. Hai bhī sachḥ Nānak hosī bhī sachḥ. ||1|

AGGS, Japuji, p 1.

What is the nature of God in Sikhism? Endless debate is going on this topic on Gurmat Learning Zone (GLZ), a forum for learning concepts of Sikhism with a membership more than 10,000. Some say, God in Sikhism is monotheistic; others say, it is pantheistic and monistic; and still others claim it is panentheistic. Without going into rigmaroles of definitions, we can find an excellent explanation of nature of God in Sikhism in the paper published in journal of *Religious Enquiries* [6]: "Sikhism as a religion is uncompromisingly monotheistic. The Gurus have described God in numerous ways in their hymns mentioned in the Guru Granth Sāhib, but the oneness of the deity is consistently emphasized throughout their literature".

Furthermore, it goes on to sum up the idea of God in Sikhism [6]: "The fundamental belief in Sikhism is that God exists not merely as an idea or concept, but as a real entity. [God is indescribable, yet knowable and perceivable to anyone who is prepared to dedicate the time and energy to become perceptive to His persona.](#)

The Gurus never spoke about proofs of the existence of God. For them, He is too real, and something obvious does not require any logical proof. God is transcendent and all-pervasive at the same time. Transcendence and immanence are two aspects of the same single Supreme Reality. Reality is immanent in the entire creation, but the creation, as a whole, fails to contain God in its entirety".

It clearly shows that TRUTH of God in Sikhism is not bound in philosophical or mathematical definitions. Sikh Gurus realized the truth in their lives and practiced and preached it in their sermons recorded in SGGS. This Paper [6] explains transcendence and immanence of

God in a unique way: “God is immanent in the created world but is not limited by it”. What does it imply? It is elaborated by Guru Arjun in *Sukhmani Sahib* by explaining the process of creation by God:

ਕਈ ਬਾਰ ਪਸਰਿਓ ਪਾਸਾਰ ॥ ਸਦਾ ਸਦਾ ਇਕੁ ਏਕੰਕਾਰ ॥

Kaṁbārpasriṁopāsār. Saḍāsāḍāikekankār.

So many times, He has expanded His expansion.

Forever and ever, He is the One, the One Universal Creator.

AGGS, M. 5, p 276.

ਜਲਿ ਥਲਿ ਮਹੀਅਲਿ ਪੁਰਿਆ ਸੁਆਮੀ ਸਿਰਜਨਹਾਰੁ ॥

Jal thalmahīṁalpūriṁāsuṁāmīsirjanhār.

The Creator Lord and Master is pervading the water, the land, and the sky.

ਅਨਿਕ ਭਾਂਤਿ ਹੋਇ ਪਸਰਿਆ ਨਾਨਕ ਏਕੰਕਾਰੁ ॥

AnikbhānṭhoṁepasriṁāNānakekankār.

In so many ways, the One, the Universal Creator has diffused Himself, O Nanak.

AGGS, M. 5, p 296.

In Sikh religion, God is represented by a unique alphanumeric divine symbol, ੴ (IkOnkar), called a logo by Eleanor Nesbitt and DS Chahal [7, 8]. Nikky-Guninder Singh [9] illustrates that three modes of knowledge have been used to signify the Divine symbol- numerical, alphabetical, and geometrical. Significantly, the prime number ‘1’ is recognized by individuals of all languages, cultures and religions. It is “followed by the alpha of the Gurmukhi script, which is the sign for *One* (being) and completed by the sign for *Kar* (Is), a geometrical arc reaching away into space. This doctrine of oneness is frequently expressed by Guru Nanak and his successor Gurus throughout the AGGS:

ਏਕੇ ਏਕੁ ਏਕੁ ਹਰਿ ਆਪਿ॥

Ēko ek ek har āp.

AGS, M.5, p 289.

ਏਕੇ ਹੈ ਭਾਈ ਏਕੇ ਹੈ॥

Ēko hai bhāī eko hai. |

AGGS, M.1, P. 350.

ਏਕੇ ਕਹੀਐ ਨਾਨਕਾ ਦੂਜਾ ਕਾਹੇ ਕੂ॥

Ēko kahīṁai nānkā dūjā kāhe kū. | |

AGGS, M. 1, p 1291.

Different Aspects of God in Sikhism: God in Sikhism is

depicted in three distinct aspects: God in Himself, God in relation to creation, and God in relation to man [10]. God by himself is the one Ultimate, Transcendent Reality, *Nirguna* (without attributes), Timeless, Boundless, Formless, Ever-existent, Immutable, Ineffable, All-by Himself and even Unknowable in His entirety.

Transcendence and Immanence of God [11]: God’s transcendence means that God is above and beyond what He has created. His immanence means He continually upholds His creation by His presence within it. The Sikhism believes that God without Universe will still be God, though the Universe without God would be non-existent. This contradicts Pantheists hypothesis that God Himself would have no existence without the Universe. In Sikh religion God is perfect with or without creation of the Universe. Transcendence and immanence are not incompatible but complementary concepts. Guru Arjun beautifully illustrates this inter-relationship as follows:

ਆਪੇ ਕੀਤੇ ਰਚਨੁ ਆਪੇ ਹੀ ਰਤਿਆ ॥

Āpe kīṭo rachan āpe hī raṭiṁā.

ਆਪੇ ਹੋਇਓ ਇਕੁ ਆਪੇ ਬਹੁ ਭਤਿਆ ॥

Āpe hoṁiṁo ik āpe baho bhṭiṁā.

ਆਪੇ ਸਭਨਾ ਮੰਝਿ ਆਪੇ ਬਾਹਰਾ ॥

Āpe sabhnā manjh āpe bāhrā.

ਆਪੇ ਜਾਣਹਿ ਦੂਰਿ ਆਪੇ ਹੀ ਜਾਹਰਾ ॥

Āpe jāṇeh dūr āpe hī jāhrā.

ਆਪੇ ਹੋਵਹਿ ਗੁਪਤੁ ਆਪੇ ਪਰਗਟੀਐ ॥

Āpe hovēh gupaṭ āpe pargatīṁai.

ਕੀਮਤਿ ਕਿਸੈ ਨ ਪਾਇ ਤੇਰੀ ਥਟੀਐ ॥

Kīmaṭṭ kisai na pāṁe ṭerī thatīṁai.

ਗਹਿਰ ਗੰਭੀਰੁ ਅਥਾਹੁ ਅਪਾਰੁ ਅਗਣਤੁ ਤੂੰ ॥

Gahir gambhīr athāhu apār agṇaṭṭ ṭūṁ.

ਨਾਨਕ ਵਰਤੈ ਇਕੁ ਇਕੇ ਇਕੁ ਤੂੰ ॥੨੨॥੧॥੨॥

Nānak varṭai ik iko ik ṭūṁ.

He Himself created the Universe; He Himself imbues it.

He Himself is One, and He Himself has numerous forms.

He Himself is within all, and He Himself is beyond them.

He Himself is known to be far away, and He Himself is right here.

He Himself is hidden, and He Himself is revealed.

No one can estimate the value of Your Creation, Lord.

You are deep and profound, unfathomable, infinite and invaluable.

O Nanak, the One Lord is all-pervading.

You are the One and only. AGGS, M. 5, p 966.

These aspects are represented in Indian Philosophy by the concepts of *nirguna and saguna*. Sikh Gurus have used these terms frequently to describe the transcendental and immanent aspects of God. In SGGs (Raag Gauri Sukhmani), Guru Arjun made use of these concepts to describe God [4]:

ਨਿਰੰਕਾਰ ਆਕਾਰ ਆਪਿ ਨਿਰਗੁਨ ਸਰਗੁਨ ਏਕ ॥

Nirankār ākār āp nirgun sargun ek.

ਏਕਹਿ ਏਕ ਬਖਾਨਨੇ ਨਾਨਕ ਏਕ ਅਨੇਕ ॥

Ēkēh ek bakḥānāno Nānak ek anek.

He Himself is formless, and also formed; the One Lord is without attributes, and also with attributes.

Describe the One Lord as One, and Only One; O Nanak, He is the One, and the many.

AGGS, M. 5, p 250.

ਸਰਗੁਨ ਨਿਰਗੁਨ ਨਿਰੰਕਾਰ ਸੁੰਨ ਸਮਾਧੀ ਆਪਿ ॥

Sargun nirgun nirankār sunn samādhī āp.

ਆਪਨ ਕੀਆ ਨਾਨਕਾ ਆਪੇ ਹੀ ਫਿਰਿ ਜਾਪਿ ॥

Āpan kīā nānkā āpe hī fir jāp.

He possesses all qualities; He transcends all qualities; He is the Formless Lord. He Himself is in Primal Samaadhi.

Through His Creation, O Nanak, He meditates on Himself.

AGGS, M. 5, p 290.

God as the Person: Rajinder Kaur [12] establishes that God is a perfect Person in her Ph.D. Thesis submitted to Punjab University, Chandigarh, published as “God in Sikhism”. In Sikh Scripture, God is mostly addressed as Thou (You), which means for the Sikhs, God communicates with individuals through the revelation and who Himself is communicable by way of spiritual religious experience. God is defined as “Karta Purakh” in Moolmantar, i.e., a creative Person who creates the Universe. He is called “Adi Purakh”, the primeval Being, and all powerful “Samrath Purakh”. Guru Ramdas addressed God as that Person “So Purakh” who is pure and inaccessible:

ਸੇ ਪੁਰਖੁ ਨਿਰੰਜਨੁ ਹਰਿ ਪੁਰਖੁ ਨਿਰੰਜਨੁ

ਹਰਿ ਅਗਮਾ ਅਗਮ ਅਪਾਰਾ ॥

So purakh Niranjan har purakh Niranjan har agma agam apārā.

That Primal Being is Immaculate and Pure. The Lord, the

Primal Being, is Immaculate and Pure. The Lord is Inaccessible, Unreachable and Unrivalled.

ਤੁਧੁ ਆਪੇ ਸ੍ਰਿਸਟਿ ਸਭ ਉਪਾਈ ਜੀ ਤੁਧੁ ਆਪੇ ਸਿਰਜਿ ਸਭ ਗੋਈ ॥

Fuḏḥ āpe sarisat sabḥ upāī jī tuḏḥ āpe Siraj sabḥ goī.

You Yourself created the entire universe, and having fashioned it, You Yourself shall destroy it all.

AGGS, M.4, p 1-11.

Guru Nanak calls God as the Creator Person, inaccessible but pervading in the Universe:

ਤੂੰ ਕਰਤਾ ਪੁਰਖੁ ਅਗੰਮੁ ਹੈ ਰਵਿਆ ਸਭ ਠਾਈ ॥

Fū kartā purakh agamm hai raviā sabḥ ṭhāī.

You are the Creator, the Inaccessible Primal Lord God; You are all-pervading everywhere.

AGGS, M. 1, p 1291.

God and Man Inter-relationship: In Sikh scripture (SGGS), the Human (*homo sapien*) are considered as the summon bonum of creation. Spiritual experience is the privilege of human beings only. God is Person and as a Person can reveal Himself to persons. Guru Arjun makes this unequivocal declaration in SGGs: “O Man, you stand in a special category of creation. All other creatures exist to serve the purpose of your spiritual illumination”.

ਅਵਰ ਜੋਨਿ ਤੇਰੀ ਪਨਿਹਾਰੀ ॥ ਇਸੁ ਧਰਤੀ ਮਹਿ ਤੇਰੀ ਸਿਕਦਾਰੀ ॥

Avar jon ṭerī panihārī. Is ḏhartī meh ṭerī sikdārī

Other people may be your water-carriers; in this world, you may be a ruler.

AGGS, M. 5, p374.

God is presented as Father, Mother, Brother, Son and Relative in many hymns in SGGs. One can refer to the following hymns of Guru Arjun to bring home the truth of point under discussion:

ਤੂੰ ਸਾਝਾ ਸਾਹਿਬੁ ਬਾਪੁ ਹਮਾਰਾ ॥

Fū'n sājhā sahib bāp hamārā.

You are the Universal Father of all, O my Lord and Master.

AGGS, M. 5, p 97.

ਤੂੰ ਮੇਰਾ ਪਿਤਾ ਤੂੰ ਮੇਰਾ ਮਾਤਾ ॥

Fū'n merā pitā tū'n hai merā mātā.

ਤੂੰ ਮੇਰਾ ਬੰਧਪੁ ਤੂੰ ਮੇਰਾ ਭ੍ਰਾਤਾ ॥

Fū'n merā bandḥap tū'n merā bhārātā.

You are my Father, and You are my Mother.

You are my Relative, and You are my Brother.

AGGS, M.5, p 103.

ਮਾਤ ਪਿਤਾ ਸੁਤ ਬੰਧਯੋ ਤੂੰ ਮੇਰੇ ਪ੍ਰਾਣ ਅਧਾਰ॥

Māt piṭā suṭ bandh̄pō tūn mere parāṇ aḍhār.
You are my mother, father, son and relative; You are the Support of the breath of life.
AGGS, M.5, p 203)

ਭਾਈ ਪੁਤੁ ਪਿਤਾ ਪ੍ਰਭੁ ਮਾਤਾ॥੩॥

Bhāī pūt piṭā parabh̄ māṭā. |
God is my Brother, Son, Father and Mother.
AGGS, M.5, p 240.

Relationship of Bridegroom and Bride between God and Man: In Sikh scripture, a unique relationship exists between God and his devotee. The metaphor of Bride is used for the soul of man and the metaphor of Bridegroom for God. I believe in no other religion such an intimate relationship exists between Man and God. The following quotes from SGGs establish the validity of this relationship:

ਮੁੰਧੇ ਪਿਰ ਬਿਨੁ ਕਿਆ ਸੀਗਾਰੁ ॥

Mundh̄e pir bin kiā sīgār.
O soul-bride, without your Husband Lord, what good are your decorations?
AGGS, M.1, p 18.

ਆਪੇ ਹੋਵੈ ਚੋਲੜਾ ਆਪੇ ਸੇਜ ਭਤਾਰੁ ॥੧॥

Āpe hovai chōlṛā āpe sej bhātār. ||1||
He Himself is the Bride in her dress, He Himself is the Bridegroom on the bed. ||1||
AGGS, M.1, p 23.

ਕਹੁ ਨਾਨਕ ਸਹੁ ਘਰ ਮਹਿ ਬੈਠਾ ਸੇਹੇ ਬੰਕ ਦੁਆਰੇ ॥੨॥

Kaho Nānak saho ghar meh̄ baiṭhā sohe bank̄ duāre.
||2||
Says Nanak, my Bridegroom is sitting in my home; the gates of my body are beautifully adorned. ||2||
AGGS, M.5, p 452.

Personification of God: Rajinder Kaur [13] concludes that Sikh concept of God cannot be discussed under any accepted “Isms” of Philosophy. It is neither Theism nor Monotheism strictly. The Sikh concept of

God is certainly not Pantheism, and it is again not Panentheism even though the Sikh religion believes in Transcendence and Immanence of God. [Sikh concept of God is rooted in God the “Person”](#). Hence, if we want to give it a label, it can be “Personism” or “Purakhvad”. I do not agree with the new label suggested by Rajinder Kaur.

The fundamental belief of Sikh Religion is that God exists as an Ultimate Reality which is beyond description. However, in Sikh religion, the God can be realized in person by a God-conscious person, called *Brahmgyani* by Guru Arjun in the Sukhmani Sahib (SGGS). The status of *Brahmgyani* in Sikh religion is so exalted that the distinction between Man and God disappears. I think the following quotes are the best examples of Personification of God in Sikh religion:

ਬ੍ਰਹਮ ਗਿਆਨੀ ਕਉ ਖੋਜਹਿ ਮਹੇਸੁਰ ॥ਨਾਨਕ ਬ੍ਰਹਮ ਗਿਆਨੀ ਆਪਿ ਪਰ ਮੇਸੁਰ ॥

Barahm giānī kaṳo khōjeh̄ mahesur. Nānak barahm giānī āp pamesur.

The God-conscious being is sought by the great god Shiva.
O Nanak, the God-conscious being is Himself the Supreme Lord God.

ਬ੍ਰਹਮ ਗਿਆਨੀ ਕਾ ਸਗਲ ਅਕਾਰੁ ॥ਬ੍ਰਹਮ ਗਿਆਨੀ ਆਪਿ ਨਿਰੰਕਾਰੁ ॥

Barahm giānī kā sagal akār. Barahm giānī āp nirankār.

The God-conscious being owns the entire creation.
The God-conscious being is himself the Formless Lord.
AGGS, M. 5, p 273-74.

CONCLUSIONS

Sikhism is a theistic religion. Oneness of God is represented explicitly by icon ੴ. God is manifested in nature. The relationship between man and God is unique and revealed by merger of the entity into the whole. The nature of God revealed by SGGs leads us to conclude that God in Sikh religion is not confined to the narrow boundaries of any definition. It is compatible with monotheism of Islam. Its transcendence and immanence (*nirgun & sargun*) aspects establish its relationship with Vedantic Hindu concept of

God. The God and Man inter-relationship as Father, Mother and Bridegroom makes its correspondence with Christian concept of God as a viable option. Consequently, the Sikh Scripture qualifies as a Universal Scripture for all the mankind.

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