

MISINTERPRETATION OF GURBANI BY W H McLEOD

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ABSTRACT

Professor McLeod's interpretation of Gurbani suggests that transmigration based on karma is a part of the Sikh belief system whereas Aad Guru Granth Sahib rejects these beliefs unequivocally.

INTRODUCTION

Professor W H McLeod is widely known for his controversial views regarding Sikhism. His work has received in-depth scrutiny from some Sikh scholars. Recently, while browsing through the religious section of a library, the reviewer's comments on the cover of McLeod's book '*Guru Nanak and the Sikh Religion*' caught my attention [4]. For the benefit of the readers, some of these comments are reproduced hereunder:

"W H McLeod is widely known as being among the foremost scholars of Sikh studies in the world. In his analysis and comparison of his sources Dr McLeod's touch is so sure, his critical faculty so acute, his zest in unraveling the truth so patent and the sheer scholarly honesty of the enterprise so palpable that the turgid and sometimes the puerile fables acquire a new interest, and the very process of exact scholarship which can be so tedious becomes fascinating and absorbing."

However, I found several statements and the elucidation of many verses in this book to be inconsistent with Guru Nanak's philosophy given in the Aad Guru Granth Sahib (AGGS) [1], which is the only authentic source of Sikh religion.

DISCUSSION

1. Karmi and Karma

While, elaborating on the differences between Sufis and Guru Nanak, McLeod says, "*The obvious example of this is his acceptance of the doctrines of*

karma and transmigration [4, p 159]." Later on he says that Guru Nanak rejected the caste system [4, p 209-210].

It seems that McLeod is not familiar with the history of caste system in India. . Manu was the architect of 'caste system' which divided the Indian people into four castes [6, p 17-29, 30-51]. This system was designed to serve the interests of Brahmins at the expense of a vast majority of people belonging to other castes, the bulk of whom belonged to the Shudar caste. Theology was created in order to perpetuate this system for eternity. The sacred Hindu scriptures proclaimed that God sanctioned the caste system [6, 33-34]. Strict observance of caste rules and regulations was made the essence of Hindu Religion and transgressors were severely punished.

Later on came the doctrines of *karma* and transmigration to desensitize people's sense of justice and compassion against the atrocities committed on the masses to enforce the caste system [6, p 34-35]. According to the laws of *karma* and transmigration, one reaps the fruit in this life for the deeds performed in the previous life. So, if a person is subjected to injustice and cruelty in this life, it is due to one's own actions in previous life, not due to the perpetrators of cruelty and injustice. By observing the caste rules strictly and serving the superior castes faithfully one can earn the reward for next life. So how could Guru Nanak reject the caste system while accepting the doctrines of *karma* and transmigration? Contrary to McLeod's views, Guru Nanak rejected all the essentials of Hinduism and the moral authority of Hindu sacred texts [2, p 29- 33].

(Editorial Note: Misinterpretation of Gurbani and misrepresentation of Sikhism is not a new thing in the history of the Sikhs. It started right during the time of the Sikh Gurus and is still going on. It is not only the non-Sikh scholars but many Sikh scholars are doing so either ignorantly or innocently or on purpose to meet certain objectives. Readers can find such examples in the following article:

Chahal, D. S. 2001. Causes of misinterpretation of Gurbani and misrepresentation of Sikhism. *Understanding Sikhism Res. J. 3* (1): 12-23 & 39.

The present article of Dr Baldev Singh is a part of this series on pointing out misinterpretations of Gurbani and misrepresentation of Sikhism.)

Some examples from McLeod's book have been selected for discussion in this brief article to demonstrate McLeod's misinterpretation of Sikh views *vis-à-vis* the theory of transmigration and *karma* and his lack of knowledge of the language of the AGGS and understanding of Sikh principles.

On page 205 he has interpreted ' *karmi aavai kpra nadri mokh duar*' (ਕਰਮੀ ਆਵੈ ਕਪੜਾ ਨਦਰੀ ਮੋਖੁ ਦੁਆਰੁ) as: *Karma* determines the nature of our birth (lit. cloth), but it is through grace that the door of salvation is found. He has made three mistakes in the interpretation of this verse. First, he has taken a single verse from a stanza of seven verses, which are inter related to each other. Second, *karmi* (ਕਰਮੀ) is not derived from *karam* (Punjabi) or *karma* (Sanskrit) meaning actions, it is derived from *karam* (Persian) meaning kindness or favor. Third, *kapra* (ਕਪੜਾ) does not mean birth; it means cloth or clothing, a metaphor for 'robe of honor'. Contrary to McLeod, almost a century ago, Macauliffe interpreted this verse accurately as follows [3, p 197]:

ਸਾਚਾ ਸਾਹਿਬੁ ਸਾਚੁ ਨਾਇ ਭਾਖਿਆ ਭਾਉ ਅਪਾਰੁ॥
ਆਖਹਿ ਮੰਗਹਿ ਦੇਹਿ ਦੇਹਿ ਦਾਤਿ ਕਰੇ ਦਾਤਾਰੁ॥
ਫੇਰਿ ਕਿ ਅਗੈ ਰਖੀਐ ਜਿਤੁ ਦਿਸੈ ਦਰਬਾਰੁ॥
ਮੁਹੋ ਕਿ ਬੋਲਣੁ ਬੋਲੀਐ ਜਿਤੁ ਸੁਣ ਧਰੇ ਪਿਆਰੁ॥
ਅੰਮ੍ਰਿਤ ਵੇਲਾ ਸਚੁ ਨਾਉ ਵਡਿਆਈ ਵੀਚਾਰੁ॥
ਕਰਮੀ ਆਵੈ ਕਪੜਾ ਨਦਰੀ ਮੋਖੁ ਦੁਆਰੁ॥
ਨਾਨਕ ਏਵੈ ਜਾਣੀਐ ਸਭੁ ਆਪੇ ਸਚਿਆਰੁ॥

AGGS, Jap 4, P 2.

"True is the Lord, true is his name; it is uttered with endless love.

People pray and beg, 'Give us, give us'; the Giver giveth His gifts.

Then what can we offer Him whereby His court may be seen?

What words shall we utter with our lips, on hearing which He may love us?

At the ambrosial hour of morning meditate on true Name and God's greatness.

The Kind One will give us a robe of honour, and by his favour we shall reach the gate of salvation.

Nanak, we shall thus know that God is altogether true."

Professor Sahib Singh has also interpreted this verse the same way as Macauliffe has done [7, p-58-59]. (This way) the Gracious One gives a scarf (of meditating on His greatness). (The wall of falsehood) is eliminated by His kindness and the door of salvation is opened to the devotee [(ਇਸ ਤਰ੍ਹਾਂ) ਪ੍ਰਭੂ ਦੀ ਮਿਹਰ ਨਾਲ 'ਸਿਫਤ'-ਰੂਪ ਪਟੋਲਾ ਮਿਲਦਾ ਹੈ, ਉਸਦੀ ਕਿਰਪਾ-ਦ੍ਰਿਸ਼ਟੀ ਨਾਲ 'ਕੂੜ ਦੀ ਪਾਲ' ਤੋਂ ਖਲਾਸੀ ਹੁੰਦੀ ਹੈ ਤੇ ਰੱਬ ਦਾ ਦਰ ਪ੍ਰਾਪਤ ਹੋ ਜਾਂਦਾ ਹੈ।].

Both, Macauliffe and Sahib Singh have interpreted *kapra* (ਕਪੜਾ) as cloth. However, due to cultural differences one calls it a robe of honor and the other calls it a scarf of love. Both robe and scarf are metaphor for God's love.

Additionally, the meaning of *kapra* (ਕਪੜਾ) as cloth becomes abundantly clear from Guru Nanak's use of this word in another Sabd. For example, in his discussions with *Jogis* Guru Nank said:

ਹਉ ਢਾਢੀ ਵੇਕਾਰੁ ਕਾਰੈ ਲਾਇਆ॥
ਰਾਤਿ ਦਿਹੈ ਕੈ ਵਾਰ ਧੁਰਹੁ ਫੁਰਮਾਇਆ॥
ਢਾਢੀ ਸਚੈ ਮਹਿਲ ਖਸਮਿ ਬੁਲਾਇਆ॥
ਸਚੀ ਸਿਫਤਿ ਸਾਲਾਹ ਕਪੜਾ ਪਾਇਆ॥

AGGS, M 1, p 150.

"I was an unemployed minstrel (*dhadi*),
But God gave me an occupation.

He ordered me to sing His praises day and night.

He called me to His abode of Truth and

Honored me with a robe (*kapra paya*, ਕਪੜਾ ਪਾਇਆ)

Of 'propagating His true glory'."

In several other places on pages, 398, 1094, 1098, 42, 470, 962 of the AGGS, *kapr* (ਕਪੜ, ਕਪੜਿ, ਕਪੜੁ) has been used for clothes. Thus using the correct meaning of *karmi* (ਕਰਮੀ) and *kapra* (ਕਪੜਾ) the verse ' *karmi aavai kpra nadri mokh duar*' (ਕਰਮੀ ਆਵੈ ਕਪੜਾ ਨਦਰੀ ਮੋਖੁ ਦੁਆਰੁ) should be translated as:

"(Then the Bounteous One) will reward us with His love and by His grace the door of salvation will open for us."

It is difficult to believe that McLeod is unaware of the fact that the doctrine of transmigration based on *karma* has been rejected in the Aad Guru Granth Sahib unequivocally. It is true that the idea of "as you sow, so shall you reap or why blame others, it is our own doing that lead us astray" is there in the AGGS. However, the Sikh Gurus did not accept the doctrine of *karma* in any fatalistic or deterministic sense. Their idea is of a Creative God with Will and Purpose, who is greatly concerned with the improvement and evolution of His creation and the imperfect beings [5, p 215-216]. The Aad Guru Granth Sahib clearly rejects the theory of transmigration based on *karma* by asking its proponents:

ਜਬ ਕਛੁ ਨ ਸੀਓ ਤਬ ਕਿਆ ਕਰਤਾ ਕਵਨ ਕਰਮ ਕਰਿ ਆਇਆ॥

ਅਪਨਾ ਖੋਲੁ ਆਪਿ ਕਰਿ ਦੇਖੈ ਠਾਕੁਰਿ ਰਚਨੁ ਰਚਾਇਆ॥

AGGS, M, 5, P 748.

"When there was no creation,

How did the first being inherit karma,

Or who created karma initially.

(The reality is) that it is God Who created the world.

For Him creation is a game and He continues to play.”

ਪੰਚ ਤਤੁ ਮਿਲਿ ਕਾਇਆ ਕੀਨੀ ਤਤੁ ਕਹਾ ਤੇ ਕੀਨੁ ਰੇ॥
ਕਰਮ ਬਧ ਤੁਮ ਜੀਉ ਕਹਿਤ ਹੋ ਕਰਮਹਿ ਕਿਨਿ ਜੀਉ ਦੀਨ ਰੇ॥

AGGS, Kabir, P 870.

*“You say that the body is made of five elements,
From where were the elements created?
You say that the law of karma determines man’s fate,
But who created the law of karma?”*

ਮਾਇ ਨ ਹੋਤੀ ਬਾਪੁ ਨ ਹੋਤਾ ਕਰਮੁ ਨ ਹੋਤੀ ਕਾਇਆ ॥
ਹਮ ਨਹੀ ਹੋਤੇ ਤੁਮ ਨਹੀ ਹੋਤੇ ਕਵਨੁ ਕਹਾ ਤੇ ਆਇਆ॥
ਸਾਸਤੁ ਨ ਹੋਤਾ ਬੇਦ ਨਾ ਹੋਤਾ ਕਰਮੁ ਕਹਾ ਤੇ ਆਇਆ॥

AGGS, Namdev, P 973.

*“When there was neither father, nor mother,
Nor body, nor karma, or when neither you were there,
Nor I was there, what came from where?
From where did the karma originate,
When there was no Veda and Shastra?”*

The idea of creativity and growth are an integral part of life and morality according to the philosophy in the AGGS. Furthermore, there is no talk about the past life or the life after; the stress is laid on the present life. For example,

ਦਰ ਦਰਸਨ ਕਾ ਪ੍ਰੀਤਮੁ ਹੋਵੈ ਮੁਕਤਿ ਬੈਕੁੰਠੈ ਕਰੈ ਕਿਆ॥

AGGS, M, 1, P 360.

*“Why should he who wants to have a glimpse of the Beloved,
Should bother about the salvation in paradise?”*

ਭਈ ਪਰਾਪਤਿ ਮਾਨੁਖ ਦੇਹੁਰੀਆ॥

ਗੋਬਿੰਦ ਮਿਲਣ ਕੀ ਇਹ ਤੇਰੀ ਬਰੀਐ॥

AGGS, M, 5, P 378.

“Human birth is a blessing, this is your opportunity to meet God”

ਆਗਾਹਾ ਕੂ ਤ੍ਰਾਪਿ ਪਿਛਾ ਫੇਰਿ ਨਾ ਮੁਹਡੜਾ॥

ਨਾਨਕ ਸਿਝਿ ਇਵੇਗਾ ਵਾਰ ਬਹੁੜਿ ਨਾ ਹੋਵੀ ਜਨਮੜਾ॥

AGGS, M, 5, P 1096.

*“Don’t look to the past, make efforts to move ahead
(by making yourself worthy of recognition by God).
Nanak, this is the chance (to meet God)
Because there won’t be a birth again for you.”*

ਇਹੀ ਤੇਰਾ ਅਉਸਰੁ ਇਹ ਤੇਰੀ ਬਾਰ॥

ਘਟ ਭੀਤਰਿ ਤੁ ਦੇਖੁ ਬਿਚਾਰਿ॥

AGGS, Kabir, P 1159.

“This alone is your chance to meet God, ponder and seek within.”

2. Transmigration

Based on his views that Guru Nanak accepted the doctrines of *karma* and transmigration, MacLeod has interpreted expressions like ‘*avan jan* (ਆਵਣਿ ਜਾਣ), *avae javae* (ਆਵੈ ਜਾਵੈ)’ and *bhavayae* (ਭਵਾਈਐ) as cycle of birth and death or cycle of transmigration. However, in the AGGS these and other related expressions are used as metaphors for spiritual death and spiritual regeneration. According to Guru Nanak there are two types of people, *Gurmukhs* (God-centered) and *Manmukhs* (sel-centered). A *Gurmukh* is a person who dwells on God and His attributes constantly and does every thing according to His Will. Such a one achieves perfect union with God. Whereas a *Manmukh* is a degenerated person who does every thing according to his own will under the influence of *hauma* (self-centeredness). He is entangled in *maya* (material world) and leads a life of duality. He is separated from God. His mind is unsteady and he can’t decide to choose between God and *maya*. Thus he keeps experiencing spiritual death and spiritual regeneration.

On page 170, McLeod [4] has interpreted the following two verses as follows:

ਭਾਣੈ ਸੋ ਸਹੁ ਰੰਗਲਾ ਸਿਫਤਿ ਰਤਾ ਗੁਣਿਤਾਸ ਜੀਉ॥

ਭਾਣੈ ਸਹੁ ਭੀਗਵਲਾ ਹਉ ਆਵਣਿ ਜਾਣਿ ਮੁਈਆਸ ਜੀਉ॥

AGGS, M 1, P 762.

*“If it pleases Thee Thou art a Lord of joy and
I am rapt in Thy praises, Thou storehouse of excellences.
If it pleases Thee Thou art a fearsome Lord and
I go on dying in the cycle of transmigration.”*

These lines are from a Sabd about God’s Will (ਭਾਣਾ). Keeping this in mind, the interpretation of the verses should be as follows:

“(Understanding of) Your Will, makes You a Lord of Joy (for me).

(I am) absorbed in your praises, O the Storehouse of virtues.

(Ignorance of) Your Will makes You a fearsome Lord (for me) and

I keep suffering from the cycle of spiritual death and birth.”

On page 177 he [4] has translated a whole Sabd except the first two lines to explain the nature of unregenerate man. However, his interpretation of the two lines following *rahau* (Pause) described below is incorrect and not consistent with the rest of the Sabd:

“Many times I was born as a tree,

Many times as an animal,

Many times I came in the form of a snake,

And many times I flew as a bird.”

Full Verse is as follows:

ਕਤ ਕੀ ਮਾਈ ਬਾਪੁ ਕਤ ਕੇਰਾ ਕਿਦੂ ਥਾਵਹੁ ਹਮ ਆਏ॥
 ਅਗਨਿ ਬਿੰਬ ਜਲ ਭੀਤਰਿ ਨਿਪਜੇ ਕਾਹੇ ਕੰਮਿ ਉਪਾਏ॥
 ਮੇਰੇ ਸਾਹਿਬਾ ਕਉਣੁ ਜਾਣੈ ਗੁਣ ਤੇਰੇ॥
 ਕਹੇ ਨ ਜਾਨੀ ਅਉਗਣ ਮੇਰੇ॥ ਰਹਾਉ॥
 ਕੇਤੇ ਰੁਖ ਬਿਰਖ ਹਮ ਚੀਨੇ ਕੇਤੇ ਪਸੂ ਉਪਾਏ॥
 ਕੇਤੇ ਨਾਗ ਕੁਲੀ ਮਹਿ ਆਏ ਕੇਤੇ ਪੰਖ ਉਡਾਏ॥
 ਹਟ ਪਟਣ ਬਿਜ ਮੰਦਰ ਭੰਨੈ ਕਰਿ ਚੋਰੀ ਘਰਿ ਆਵੈ॥
 ਅਗਹੁ ਦੇਖੈ ਪਿਛਹੁ ਦੇਖੈ ਤੁਝ ਤੇ ਕਹਾ ਛਪਾਵੈ॥
 ਤਟ ਤੀਰਥ ਹਮ ਨਵ ਖੰਡ ਦੇਖੇ ਹਟ ਪਟਣ ਬਾਜਾਰਾ॥
 ਲੈ ਕੈ ਤਕੜੀ ਤੋਲਣਿ ਲਾਗਾ ਘਟ ਹੀ ਮਹਿ ਵਣਜਾਰਾ॥
 ਜੇਤਾ ਸਮੁੰਦੁ ਸਾਗਰੁ ਨੀਰਿ ਭਰਿਆ ਤੇਤੇ ਅਉਗਣ ਹਮਾਰੇ॥
 ਦਇਆ ਕਰਹੁ ਕਿਛੁ ਮਿਹਰ ਉਪਾਵਹੁ ਡੁਬਦੇ ਪਬਰ ਤਾਰੇ॥
 ਜੀਅੜਾ ਅਗਨਿ ਬਰਾਬਰਿ ਤਪੈ ਭੀਤਰਿ ਵਗੈ ਕਾਤੀ॥
 ਪ੍ਰਣਵਤਿ ਨਾਨਕੁ ਹੁਕਮੁ ਪਛਾਣੈ ਸੁਖੁ ਹੋਵੈ ਦਿਨ ਰਾਤੀ॥
 AGGS, M 1, P156.

This Sabd is about a sinful man. He is separated from God due to his *haumai* (self-centeredness) and preoccupation with *maya*. However, he has recognized his folly. He is repentant and is beseeching God with humility for forgiveness. He starts but by asking the purpose of his life. The gist of the Sabd is contained in the two lines before *Rahau*: O my Lord, who can comprehend Your virtues! None can recount my sins. Guru Nanak advises this man to recognize God's *hukm* (Laws of Nature) and live in harmony with it. The sinful man acknowledges his faults by saying that other creatures like trees, animals, snakes and birds do not commit sin because they live according to God's *hukm*, whereas he is accumulating sin after sin due to his *haumai*.

Now let us look at the meaning of the whole Sabd line by line:

*"When did someone become my mother or father; where did I come from?
 I was conceived and nurtured in the amniotic fluid in the womb;
 What was the purpose of my coming to this world?
 O my Lord, who can comprehend Your virtues? None can recount my sins. Pause.
 I have seen numerous trees, animals, snakes and birds (who do not commit sin).
 Whereas I break into city shops and strong buildings and bring home the stolen goods.
 I look around to make sure that no body sees me, but how can I hide it from You?
 (To wash my sins) I go on pilgrimage everywhere to sacred shores, places, cities, markets and shops.
 While weighing my merits and demerits in my heart,
 (I realized that) my sinfulness is as immense as the water*

*in the ocean. Dear God take mercy on me ,
 With Your grace stonehearted beings can cross (the ocean of worldly temptations).
 My mind is burning with the fire of (haumai) and the (temptations of maya) are cutting it like a knife.
 Nanak prays that those who live in harmony with the Divine Order attain eternal bliss."*

On page 204 he says, "*Why so few have a vision of God? One explanation is that karma determines the issue. Those who in their previous existences have lived lives of relative merit acquire thereby a faculty of perception, which enables them to recognize the Guru. This theory has a logical consistency and in one place it would appear to be explicitly affirmed.*" He quotes the following verse (second) in support of his views.

ਜਵਿਦਿਆ ਲਾਹਾ ਮਿਲੈ ਗੁਰ ਕਾਰ ਕਮਾਵੈ॥
 ਪੂਰਬਿ ਹੋਵੈ ਲਿਖਿਆ ਤਾ ਸਤਿਗੁਰੁ ਪਾਵੈ॥
 AGGS, M 1, p 421.

"If it is inscribed in the record of one's former deeds then one meets the True Guru."

As already discussed, the deterministic view of *karma* is rejected in the AGGS. Thus the two verses are explained as:

*"One profits in life by performing righteous deeds.
 It is the merit of such deeds, which brings
 about one's union with God."*

On page 212 he [4] has interpreted the following couplet addressed to a Muslim as:

ਮਿਹਰ ਮਸੀਤਿ ਸਿਦਕੁ ਮੁਸਲਾ ਹਕ ਹਲਾਲੁ ਕੁਰਾਣੁ॥
 ਸਰਮ ਸੁੰਨਤਿ ਸੀਲੁ ਰੋਜਾ ਹੋਹੁ ਮੁਸਲਮਾਣੁ॥

AGGS, M, 1, p 140.

*"Make mercy your mosque, faith your prayer-mat,
 And righteousness your Quran.
 Make humility your circumcision, uprightness your fasting,
 And so you will be a (true) Muslim."*

Here he has interpreted 'saram (ਸਰਮ)' as humility, which is incorrect. 'Saram (ਸਰਮ)' means 'sharam (ਸ਼ਰਮ)' or *luja* (ਲੱਜਾ)' meaning sense of shame. Since the discussion is about male circumcision, it is about sexual morality of man. Therefore, the correct interpretation should be 'make fidelity your circumcision'.

CONCLUSIONS

McLeod's assumption that Guru Nanak accepted the doctrines of *karma* and transmigration is not supported by the philosophy of AGGS. He has misinterpreted many verses to justify his assumptions of *Karama* and

transmigration according to ancient philosophy either ignorantly or with certain objectives. It is not only in McLeod's book, such misinterpretations by many Sikh scholars are found in many Punjabi and English translations of the AGGS found in the prints, on Compact Discs, and on many Internet sites in these days.

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