

# BASICS TO FORMULATE RELIGIOUS ETHICS IN SIKHISM\*

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## ABSTRACT

*The ethics (Code of Conduct) for the Sikhs were formulated by Sikh theologians long time ago in 1945, which were based on information found in old Rehit Namay, Hukam Namay, Janam Sakhis, Sikh history and Gurbani. In these days some theologians and researchers and also some Sikh Institutes and Sikh organizations are demanding to revise it since it was formulated long time ago and is not serving its purpose during the current Science Age. The Sikhs dwelling in different parts of the world under different political and environmental conditions are also demanding change in the current Sikh Rehit Maryada (Sikh Code of Conduct). In this article some basics to formulate universally acceptable ethics in Sikhism have been discussed.*

## INTRODUCTION

The ethical concern in Sikhism remained ignored right from the beginning for a considerable time. However, some Sikh writers during the 18<sup>th</sup> to 19<sup>th</sup> century have been recommending some ethics (conduct) in the form of *Rehit Maryada* (Code of Conduct). The major sources of these ethics were *Varaan* (Compositions) of Bhai Gurdas, *Janam-sakhis* (Biographies of Sikh Gurus), *Hukm Namay* by Sikh Gurus [12], and *Rehit Namay* by individual writers [10], *Dasam Granth*, and Sikh history but very little was based on the Gurbani. Since there were a lot of contradictions in ethics recommended by various writers, therefore, Shiromani Gurdwara Parbandhak Committee (SGPC), Amritsar thought of formulating a standardized *Rehit Maryada*. A large number of expert Sikh theologians deliberated on this issue during early 1900s in a number of meetings. Finally their recommendations were published by the SGPC in 1945 as the *Sikh Rehit Marayada* (The Sikh Code of Conduct) to be followed by all the Sikh Gurdwaras and the Sikhs.

It was later part of 2002; I was invited by Dr John F Peppin, Director, Center for Bioethics, Pain Management & Medicine, Des Moines, USA, to write a Chapter on ‘*Sikh Perspective of Bioethics*’ for *Annals of Bioethics* [3]. When I was searching for information on bioethics from Sikh perspective point of view I could not find any from available literature. It might be due to the fact that Sikhism is generally considered as a part of Hinduism thus nobody thought to represent Sikhism while dealing with bioethics. So much so that even the *Sikh Rehit Maryada*

(SRM) of Shiromani Gurdwara Parbandhak Committee (SGPC), Amritsar is quite silent on the issue of bioethics. When this Chapter was published in 2004 it turned out to be the first and unique in the *Annals of Bioethics* as remarked by Dr Peppin since it was based on principles of Nanakian Philosophy. Soon, thereafter, I was approached by Ms Catherine Sagues to write an article on ethics in Administration, **Régler un disaccord par la discussion amicable**, which appeared under **L'éthique et les affaires une quête de sens in *Entreprendre***, Laval, Canada in 2005 [4]. Here again the SRM of SGPC could not be of any help to write this article. It was also the first article in which the ethics in administration was based on principles of Nanakian Philosophy. In both cases the principles of Nanakian Philosophy embodied in the Bani of Guru Nanak were helpful for me to write a Chapter on bioethics and an article on ethics in administration.

I am very happy to know that today a conference on ‘*Ethical Concerns of World Religions*’ is being held at the university named after Guru Nanak (1469-1539) who promulgated a unique and original philosophy during the Period of Renaissance (14<sup>th</sup> to 16<sup>th</sup> centuries) which has all the characteristics of universal acceptability for formulating ethics. Moreover, it is also the mandate of this university, Guru Nanak Dev University, to conduct studies and research on the life and teachings of Guru Nanak [<http://www.gndu.ac.in/>]. Since the conference is on ‘*Ethical Concerns of the World Religions*’ which means it includes formulation of all types of ethics from

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Sikh perspective. There is every possibility that direct application of any verse from the Aad Guru Granth Sahib may not be applicable to formulate various types of ethics. Therefore, it is envisaged that the basic principles of Nanakian Philosophy embodied in the Bani of Guru Nanak will be quite helpful to formulate ethics applicable in various environmental conditions for various types of people like, doctors, researchers, administrators, politicians, civilians, army personals and even for the Sikh theologians and the custodians of the Sikhi (Sikhism).

Under the above circumstances I have decided to write about '**Basics to Formulate Religious Ethics in Sikhism**' for presentation at this conference, '*Ethical Concerns of World Religions*' being held at the Guru Nanak Dev University, Amritsar on February 22-23, 2008. It seems to be most difficult task because of too diverse opinions on this topic among various Sikh theologians and organizations. It is due to the fact that most of the ethics being practiced in Sikhism were based on more than 80% of the information found in *Janam Sakhis*, *Rehit Namay* [10], *Hukm Namay of Sikh Gurus* [12], *Vaaran* of Bhai Gurdas, *the Dasam Granth*, and Sikh history but very little was based on philosophy embodied in the Gurbani incorporated in the Aad Guru Granth Sahib (AGGS). Moreover, the current SRM of SGPC is also silent on bioethics for Doctors, Geneticists and Scientists and ethics for the government, administrators, politicians, and for the Sikh dwelling in countries other than India.

Besides, I have just found out from a recent missive (February 14, 2008) on Sikh Diaspora Discussion Group in which Dr Norman Barrier has mentioned as follows: "... Also the SRM (Sikh Rehit Maryada) skirts issues of panthic conduct that continue to be controversial among Sikhs today, such as the procedure for issuing a gurmata, the administering of penances (tanakhah) and appeals over congregational and doctrinal issues such as appeals to Akal Takht. Excommunication is not mentioned. Also the relationship of the takhts is not explored."

Dr Barrier has written extensively on the Chief Khalsa Diwan [2]. His above remarks raise very serious questions as follows:

1. What should be *panthic* conduct to issue a *Gurmata*, administration of *tanakhah*, excommunication, etc ?
2. Is excommunication recommended in the Gurbani incorporated in the Aad Guru Granth Sahib?

I would like to add the third one:

3. Who is the final authority in Sikhism to decide what is wrong and what is not?

Today the *Panth* (Sikhism) is passing through some serious crises because of different opinions about some

of the ethics in the current SRM of the SGPC, Amritsar and who is the final authority in Sikhism [14]. Dobrin [7] said that matters of authority are contentious, because it is often unclear who speaks for a religion:

Who is to say what the authentic beliefs are?

Who is to say what interpretation is valid and which not?

Is a religion what its leaders say it is or is it what the people practice or is it what its Holy Granth says?

Such crises do arise occasionally in Sikhism; therefore, in this article I have tried to diagnose the root cause of such crises then to find out right basics from Gurbani for formulating the Religious Ethics in Sikhism to resolve such crises.

## ROOT CAUSE OF CRISES

The root cause of crises in Sikhism can be discussed under the following two categories:

1. Failure to Understand Gurbani
2. Inherited Weakness

### 1. Failure to Understand Gurbani

The first root cause of all types of crises in Sikhism is due to the fact of failure to understand Gurbani in its real perspective by the early writers and scholars. The Gurbani has been interpreted by various groups of Sikhism to justify their point of view. Moreover in general the Gurbani is being interpreted under the shadow of Vedantic philosophy right from the beginning under different schools of Sikhism (*Sampardaiys*) [13, 15]. The first commentary on the Aad Guru Granth Sahib, *Faridkote Wala Teeka*, was also prepared on Vedantic philosophy by the *Nirmlas* [13, 15]. Later it became the role model for further translations of the Aad Guru Granth Sahib into Punjabi and English without any improvement till today, although some scholars have tried to remove some of the influence of Vedantic philosophy, which can be considered as negligible. The failure of understanding of Gurbani in its real perspective among the Sikhs was noticed by Guru Nanak right in the beginning as is evident from his following verse:

ਬਾਣੀ<sup>੧</sup> ਬਿਰਲਉ ਬੀਚਾਰਸੀ ਜੇ ਕੋ ਗੁਰਮੁਖਿ<sup>੨</sup> ਹੋਇ ॥

ਇਹ ਬਾਣੀ<sup>੧</sup> ਮਹਾ ਪੁਰਖ ਕੀ ਨਿਜ ਘਰਿ ਵਾਸਾ ਹੋਇ ॥

ਅਗਗਸ, ਮ: ੧, ਪੰਨਾ ੯੩੫.

*Only rare Guru-oriented<sup>2</sup> will deliberate and contemplate on the word<sup>1</sup> (philosophy).*

*This is the word<sup>1</sup> (philosophy) of the pre-eminent preceptor that is to be imbibed in one's own mind.*

AGGS, M 1, p 935 [1]

### 2. Inherited Weakness

Arthur Dobrin [7] had observed that the prevalence of religion among the people of the world may indicate that there is something about human nature that predisposes them to be religious being. He said that Gestalt

psychology teaches us that people see complete pictures even when there are only partial pictures to be seen. We complete the incomplete, thereby explaining the mysterious, constructing a picture that we call reality. Often we go to the next step — finding what we expect to be the case while our minds confirm our predictions, whether or not supported by the facts. Or more precisely, we find the “facts” to support our beliefs. This mode of thinking and behaving may be so basic that it has led some to conclude: **“The process of forming [religious] beliefs is genetically hardwired”** [8, 11]. This genetic weakness to accept easily the false and luring statements in human has already been pointed out by Guru Arjan:

ਝੂਠੀ ਬਾਤ ਸਾ ਸਚੁ ਕਰਿ ਜਾਤੀ ॥

ਸਤਿ ਹੋਵਨੁ ਮਨਿ ਲਗੈ ਨ ਰਾਤੀ ॥

ਅਗਗਸ, ਮ: ਪ, ਪੰਨਾ ੧੮੫.

*One takes<sup>4</sup> it to be true<sup>3</sup> what is false statement<sup>1,2</sup>,*

*What is true<sup>4</sup> is not<sup>7</sup> imbibed in one's mind<sup>6</sup>.*

AGGS, M 5, p 185.

Later Edith Sitwell (1887-1964) observed the same behaviour of human (genetic weakness):

**“The public will believe anything, so long as it is not founded on truth.”**

The **God gene** hypothesis states that some human beings bear a gene which gives them a predisposition to episodes interpreted by some as religious revelation. This idea has been postulated and promoted by geneticist Dr Dean Hamer, the director of the Gene Structure and Regulation Unit at the US National Cancer Institute [8]. According to this hypothesis, the God gene (VMAT2) is not an encoding for the belief in God itself but a physiological arrangement that produces the sensations associated, by some, with the presence of God or other mystic experiences, or more specifically spirituality as a state of mind.

In simple terms this gene(s) is involved in the breakdown of **monoamines**, a class of neurotransmitters, which contribute to an individual emotional sensitivity. The loose interpretation is that monoamines correlate with a personality trait called self-transcendence. Composed of three sub-sets, self-transcendence is composed of ‘self-forgetfulness’ (as in the tendency to become totally absorbed in some activity, such as reading); ‘transpersonal identification’ (a feeling of connectedness to a larger universe); and ‘mysticism’ (an openness to believe things not literally provable, such as ESP). Put them all together, and you come as close as science can to measuring what it feels like to be spiritual. This allows us to have the kind of experience described as religious ecstasy or religiosity.

To narrow the field, Hamer confined his work to nine specific genes known to play major roles in the production of monoamines--brain chemicals, including **serotonin, norepinephrine, and dopamine**, that regulate such fundamental functions as mood and motor control. It's monoamines that are carefully manipulated by **Prozac** and other antidepressants. It's also monoamines that are not so carefully scrambled by ecstasy, LSD, peyote and other mind-altering drugs--some of which have long been used in religious rituals.

Studying the nine candidate genes in DNA samples provided by his subjects, Hamer quickly hit the genetic jackpot. A variation in a gene known as VMAT2--for vesicular monoamine transporter--seemed to be directly related to how the volunteers scored on the self-transcendence test. Those with the nucleic acid cytosine in one particular spot on the gene ranked high. Those with the nucleic acid adenine in the same spot ranked lower. “A single change in a single base in the middle of the gene seemed directly related to the ability to feel self-transcendence,” Hamer says. Merely having that feeling did not mean those people would take the next step and translate their transcendence into a belief in--or even a quest for--God. But they seemed likelier to do so than those who never got the feeling at all.

According to Steen [16] it is not only because of the genetic nature (DNA) but also the nurture (family and community environment) of the individual has effect on the inclination towards religiosity.

My study indicates that this genetic weakness of religiosity in human is being exploited by religious fraudulent Swamis, Pundits, Sants, Babas, Mullans, Pastors, and so-called spiritual leaders (also including Fortune-Tellers, Astrologers and Numerologists) for their personal benefit. They are creating their own religious ethics based on Gestalt psychology by using unscientific and illogical ancient concepts to lure their followers. Some of them claiming cure for all ills and can fulfill their all wishes. This genetic weakness of religiosity should be looked after by the theologians and researchers as the other genetic characters of predisposition to various diseases are being handled by the Geneticists and Medical Doctors. Therefore, it necessitates formulating special **ethical guidance** to strengthen the minds of the Sikhs so that they are not easily entrapped by such fraudulent religious or spiritual leaders. Besides it is also very important to make the Sikhs aware of the fact that no spiritual leader, real or fraudulent, has any power to the change the Laws of Nature (God's Will) to cure all their ills and grant their wishes by violating the Natural Laws [5, Chapter 16, *Hukam: The Laws of Nature*]

## FORMULATIONS OF ETHICS

### 1. Ethics and Morality

According to Dobrin [7], 'ethics' is an abstraction whose content shifts with time and differs from place to place. Moreover, some use morals and ethics as distinct terms, while others use them as synonyms. Since 'ethics' means 'morals' but morality is also considered differently by different religions as are considered ethics, therefore, it is also necessary to understand the intrinsic meanings of 'morality'. Many individuals and groups might define a moral act or state in many different ways:

- To move the society towards the principle of '*equal liberty and justice for all*'.
- To follow the dictates of God (or other deity/deities).
- To follow strictly the teachings of their sacred books and their traditions.
- To follow strictly the edicts issued by the highest authority of the religion.

In most of the religious preaching about ethics and morality very little attention is paid about the "*equal liberty and justice for all*" instead their followers are threaten to be of high morality by following strictly the dictates of the authority of their religion otherwise God (or other deity/deities) will be angry and will punish them. Many people try to be moral and good mannered and follow the authoritative dictate under this threat of punishment by God and going to Hell. Now it raises a question:

#### **Who is a Moral Person?**

Richard Dawkins [6], a scientist and atheist, says that most atheists who do not believe in divine judgment, and most theists who do, act moral. Some of both groups act consistently immoral. The claim that belief in God is essential or aids moral behavior is wrong, and any amusing theistic claim that they have 'better' morals, despite acting under a reward and punishment system, is deeply questionable. Who is more moral? Those who act for the sake of goodness itself, or those who do good acts under the belief that failure to do so results in hell?

In this connection Albert Einstein (1879-1955) says:  
*"If people are good only because they fear punishment, and hope for reward, then we are a sorry lot indeed."*

The above point of morality raised by famous atheist and scientist, Richard Dawkins, and the Noble Laureate, Albert Einstein, a great scientist of 20<sup>th</sup> century, is worth deliberating by the custodians of all the religions.

However, in this respect I want to point out that Guru Nanak has ascribed an attribute, *Nirvair* – without any enmity, to God in the '*Commencing Verse*' (commonly called Mool Mantra) in the Aad Guru Granth Sahib. If we

keep this attribute of God in mind then it is evident that Dawkins and Einstein are right to issue the above statements. Now I want to pose a question to the Sikh theologians:

#### **Are both Einstein and Dawkins not conveying the message of Guru Nanak (1469-1539)?**

If in Nanakian Philosophy God is *Nirvair* (without enmity) then should we formulate ethics which could indicate revenge or punishment from God if not followed properly?

While I was finalizing this article for publication I came across very appropriate story about morality under the regular feature, 'Inner Voice' of the Hindustan Times, Chandigarh as follows [9]:

"Edmund Burke, the 18<sup>th</sup> century Irish statesman, political theorist and philosopher, had a theologian friend as famous as he. One day the friend insisted that Burke should come and listen to him speak.

The friend prepared his best speech, marshalling his most superb oratory, for he wanted to impress Burke. During question hour the first to stand up was Burke, who said, "I have a question. You said that a man who is good, virtuous and believer in God, goes to heaven. But a man, who is not good, not virtuous and does not believe in God, goes to hell, into eternal fire. My point is," he continued, "that you have simplified things too much. I want to know: if a man is good and virtuous and does not believe in God – where does he go?"

The theologian was at a loss. He said, "I want seven days. I will answer next Sunday." Those seven days were really hellfire for the friend who could not sleep. Scripture was of no help and Sunday inevitable arrived, with Burke.

The theologian confessed, "I tried my hardest but could not find the answer. I have had to conclude that whatever I said was not right. **It is not a question of good people going to heaven; on the contrary, it is rather that wherever the virtuous and the good people go, they will create heaven.** And belief in God is irrelevant. It is your individual choice – you may believe, you may not believe. It does not matter in the ultimate conclusions of life." Burke was satisfied.

Therefore, the first basic 'ethics' should be such which helps to develop morality without any string attached

### 2. Liberty

Till today the major emphasis in Sikh ethics remained to maintain the Sikh identity and how many Bani are to be recited everyday, how to treat the Aad Guru Granth Sahib in the Gurdwaras, method of initiation of Sikhs

into *Amritdhari* Sikhs, methods to perform marriage and other ceremonies and rituals. However, ethics on liberty - the freedom to think or act without being constrained by necessity or force for positive enjoyment of various social, political or economic rights – remained ignored in the current SRM of the SGPC. More than half a century has elapsed since the SRM was formulated by the SGPC, Amritsar and during this time science and technology have advanced more than 100 times and the Sikhs are dwelling in different parts of the globe (like USA – commonly called ‘*Melting Pot*’ where different cultures are melting into one) with different environments and neighborhood of different religions. Therefore, it is utmost important that the current SRM be suitably revised, which could be universally acceptable.

Besides, the ethics, which should cultivate high morality and sense of altruism and egalitarianism and move the Sikhs towards the principle of “*equal liberty and justice for all.*” The most important ethic to be formulated is to give ‘*Freedom of speech*’ to every Sikh researcher and Sikh scholar to find the truth and to disseminate Gurbani and Sikhism in their real perspective.

### 3. Acceptability of Ethics in Different Environments

Dobrin [7] said that ‘ethics’ is an abstraction whose content shifts with time and differs from place to place. This important point is being ignored since the *Sikh Rehit Maryada* was formulated during early 1900 and was finalized in 1945. Now the Sikhs are no more the dwellers of a small area, Punjab, but have become the inhabitants of many other countries of the globe with entirely different political and environmental conditions than that in Punjab. Moreover, advances in different sciences and technologies have also changed the minds of the young Sikhs toward their religion. Therefore, the younger generation will not be accepting any ethics which are scientifically and logical wrong and are not suitable to their places of dwelling. Consequently, it necessitates developing universally acceptable ethics to make the Sikhs as most civilized nation of the world.

### 4. Source of Information

It is of utmost important to decide that what are those authentic sources of information from which authentic basics could be derived for formulating the ethics? In my opinion Guru Nanak is the founder of unique and original philosophy, which is embodied in his Bani, incorporated in the Aad Guru Granth Sahib. His philosophy, is termed as ‘*Nanakian Philosophy*’, which has been further strengthened and explained by the Sikh Gurus who succeeded to the ‘*House of Nanak*’ in their Bani which has also been incorporated in the Aad Guru Granth Sahib along with the Bani of Guru Nanak [5, Chapter 4 & 5]. Therefore, the Aad Guru Granth is the only original and authentic source of information of *Nanakian Philosophy*.

We have already discussed that it is not an easy task to understand Gurbani in its real perspective. Some specific examples of misinterpretation of Gurbani have been quoted by Chahal [5, Chapter 8], which indicated that such interpretations are quite far away from portraying the real philosophy embodied in the Gurbani. Therefore, it raises a question:

### Whose interpretation of Gurbani is right?

### 5. Which is Right Interpretation of Gurbani?

Those days have gone when interpretation of Gurbani by mere theologians were considered to be right because the Sikhs of the Current Science Age are not convinced until the Gurbani is interpreted and explained scientifically and logically. Therefore, it is necessary that Gurbani be interpreted collectively by well-educated theologians and specialists of various fields: Physical and Natural Sciences (especially Microbiology, Molecular Biology, Genetics, Sociobiology, and Neuroscience), Astronomy, Philosophy, Psychology, Languages (especially the Archaic Punjabi - erroneously named as *Prakrit*), Political and Social Sciences, etc.

I envisage that the interpretation of Gurbani by these experts could be considered more close to the original philosophy embodied in Gurbani and it could be considered more authentic interpretation than that done by mere theologians provided that it can be further improved when better explanation becomes available.

### 6. Ethics for Custodians of Religions

The conference is to deliberate on ‘*Ethical Concerns of the World Religions*’, which is a very wide and sensitive issue. It has been noticed that the theologians and scholars of each religion are very good at formulating ‘*Bioethics*’ to be followed by the Medical Doctors, Geneticists, and Scientists; ‘*Ethics*’ for Government, Politicians, and Administrators; and ‘*Religious Ethics*’ to be followed strictly by the followers of their religions but they have never thought if there were a need to formulate ‘*Ethics*’ to be followed by the custodians of religions. I would like to pose a question to the participants:

### *Should there be some ethics for custodians of religions?*

I am posing the above question because there has always been tension within every religion of the world right from the very beginning. The crisis on the authority in Sikhism is at the peak in these days [14]. Dobrin [7] is right when he said that matters of authority are contentious, because it is often unclear who speaks for a religion.

Who is to say what the authentic beliefs are?

Who is to say what interpretation is valid and which not?

Is a religion what its leaders say it is or is it what the

people practice or is it what its Holy Granth says?

The present crisis in Sikhism could be easily resolved if the following principle of Nanakian Philosophy is accepted:

ਜਬ<sup>੧</sup> ਲਗੁ<sup>੨</sup> ਦੁਨੀਆ<sup>੩</sup> ਰਹੀਐ ਨਾਨਕ ਕਿਛੁ<sup>੪</sup> ਸੁਣੀਐ<sup>੫</sup> ਕਿਛੁ ਕਹੀਐ<sup>੬</sup> ॥  
ਅਗਗਸ, ਮ: ੧, ਪੰਨਾ ੬੬੧.

*As long as<sup>1,2</sup> one lives in this world<sup>3</sup> one must listen<sup>5</sup> to others<sup>4</sup> and express<sup>6</sup> oneself to the others (to find the truth).*

AGGS, M 1, p 661.

The well educated Sikh theologians and Sikh intellectuals as mentioned earlier have to get together may be for several meetings for several years, to resolve the present crises being faced by the Sikhs of the world.

## CONCLUSIONS

- The current ethics (*Sikh Rehit Maryada*) is more than half a century old and it needs to be revised.
- Now the Sikhs are dwelling in different parts of the world with different political circumstances and environmental conditions, therefore, there is a need to formulate ethics which are scientifically and logically correct and have universal acceptability since we are living in Current Science Age and nobody is going to follow any ethics, which would be contrary to the philosophy embodied in the Gurbani and are wrong when tested scientifically and logically.
- The only authentic source of information to formulate religious ethics for the Sikhs is the Aad Guru Granth Sahib and the latest scientific information about the specific ethics.
- The Gurbani is to be interpreted properly in collaboration of well-educated theologians and experts in various fields of Physical and Natural Sciences as mentioned in the text.
- Besides formulation of ethics for the Sikhs at large there is a dire need to formulate ethics for the so-called authorities on Sikhism.

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at large like to follow the concepts that have already been accepted by the Sikhs in the past although not founded on or recommended in any Bani of any Sikh Guru, incorporated in AGGS. And the majority of the Sikhs will put all their forces to defend such concepts imprinted in their brains.

He has picked up the relevant question of Sikhism that are in the minds of rational Sikhs who are feeling concerned about the future of the religion. He has covered most of the burning issues with proper focus and methodology, dealt in proper historical, spiritual perspectives with the help of primary sources. This book will be very useful for the researchers as well as for the academicians dealing in Gurbani and Sikhism.