

FREEDOM AND RESPONSIBILITY IN SIKHISM

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The question of human freedom and necessity has been a difficult one in all religions and philosophic systems. Empirical logic has failed to resolve this problem. And yet the ethical and moral needs of man are intimately linked with this issue. All religious systems must, therefore, furnish an answer to this basic question. It is our purpose here *to* give the Gurus' views on the subject.

As uncompromising theists, the Gurus obviously do not subscribe to any notion of materialism or mechanism. In their system, prayer, love and grace have a primary significance and place. Their ideas *ipso facto* repudiate all notions about determinism or necessity.

One of the greatest contributions of the Gurus is their idea of God being a Creator who, as a God of Will and Attributes, is helping an evolutionary movement towards a being who is God-conscious. Let us try to elaborate and understand the significance of this concept

The idea of determinism is only a logical abstraction from our daily experience of cause and effect. As already stated, when pursued backwards, this idea of every effect being determined by a cause breaks down. Perforce we come to a dead end as to what is the first cause. To this Causeless cause or un-created Creative cause, the Gurus give the name of a Creator who has a Will. A Creator with a Will implies freedom to create on the part of the Self-created Creator. Otherwise, the very idea of a Creator with a Will would be a contradiction in terms- *in* other words, God has a Free Will. God is a Being who is the Master of the ways of His functioning and we do not know them. He is Free.

He is not determined by the laws of our world. The Gurus envisage a clear process of evolution in this world. According to the Gurus, is the highest evolved being. He is not only conscious, but he is also self-conscious. He has a clear capacity for discernment, reflection and deliberation. This is an attribute higher than that of other animals. Life affords man an opportunity to become a God-centered being. "This alone is your opportunity; seek within".¹ "You have been given a human body; this is your opportunity to meet God."²

The very suggestion or persuasion to avail oneself of this opportunity implies a freedom and capacity on the part of man to do so. The Gurus indicate a clear movement from comparative determinism to freedom taking place in this world. From apparently mechanistic matter, there appeared conscious life. Then appeared the self-conscious man with an increasing capacity for choice, deliberation and consequent freedom. The final achievement is to be a God-conscious person, the creative instrument of Free God or a living centre of comparative freedom. Seen in this light, the Gurus envisage a distinct evolutionary movement from comparative necessity to freedom. The more a person is free and creative, for creation assumes freedom, the nearer is he to God. This is the yardstick with which the Gurus measure a man and his progress.

In addition, there is the moral argument, which, in a way, is coextensive with the argument of freedom. We have seen that the Gurus call God as the Ocean of Attributes and Values and the True Judge. If everyone were governed by rigid determinism, the question of any moral assessment would not arise. In a deterministic world, words like 'true and false', 'right or wrong', 'good or bad', 'helpful or harmful', have no meaning; nor would words like 'ought and ought not', 'regret and happiness', 'wisdom and folly', 'just and unjust', have any significance in the case of man. These terms are never applied to the vitally determined and mechanistic world of matter. And, yet, the mystic system of the Gurus is deeply moral and ethical in its content. God is called the True One, Good, Just, Benevolent and Shelter of the shelterless. The Gurus call our world the very place of righteousness. The assessment and approval of man are based on the character of man's deeds. If human actions were predetermined, they could hardly

be called his deeds, much less could they have a moral character or be judged by the yardstick of righteousness. No one can be morally assessed unless he has the freedom of choice which he exercises voluntarily. The Gurus' entire emphasis is to persuade and exhort man to exercise the right choice. They blame man for his sufferings and frustrations since these follow from his wrong choice of deeds. The way out is to be moral and righteous, i.e., to be more free and responsible. It is by this choice of freedom and righteousness that man becomes God-centered, a synonym for release and freedom from comparative necessity and determinism.

The Gurus do not accept the doctrine of *Karma*, if it is to be understood in any fatalistic or deterministic sense. Their idea is of a Creative God, with a Will and Purpose, who is greatly concerned with the improvement and evolution of His creation and the imperfect beings. Guru Granth Sahib, clearly controverts the deterministic *Karmic* doctrine by saying that, "When there was no universe, how did the first being inherit *Karma*, or who created *Karma* initially."³ "You say that body is made of five elements, from where were the elements created? You say that man is bound by his *Karma*, who created the law of *Karma* ?"⁴ "When there was neither father, nor mother, nor form, nor *Karma*, when neither were you there, nor was I there, what came from where? When there was no *Veda* and *Shastra*, from where did *Karma* originate?"⁵ The idea of creativity and growth are an integral part of the Gurus' view of life and morality. And then, there is the basic concept of Grace overriding and controverting the doctrine of *Karma*.

The Gurus distinctly say that God creates man and grants him freedom to decide the course of his life. "Lord created the world and left it free to do as it wills."⁶ "According to their deeds, some are near and some far from God."⁷ "Man is blessed with the light of reason and discrimination."⁸ "Vices are like chains around our necks, and virtues the only friend."⁹

All these quotations from Guru Granth Sahib clearly envisage freedom on the part of man to make any decisions he likes with regard to his deeds. Had man been rigidly governed by his past and the course of his present and future actions been determined by his previous deeds, all these exhortations to man to reshape his future would be

without the importance and significance the Gurus attach to them. Evidently, the Gurus do not accept the validity of any *Karmic* or deterministic law. On the other hand, they consistently stress the freedom of man to determine the course of his activities.

No doubt, there are sayings like, "why blame others, it is our own doings that lead us astray."¹⁰ It is also true that the idea of "as you sow, so shall you reap" is there. But, all this only fortifies the principle of free will and the moral responsibility of man. There is nothing in Guru Granth Sahib to endorse the deterministic *Karmic* doctrine of traditional Brahminism. This concept has been specifically refuted in Guru Granth Sahib. The idea of "as you sow, so shall you reap," is just an appeal and exhortation to the limited sovereignty of man, so as to invoke his sense of reason, initiative, responsibility and growth.

Another point also needs clarification. It has been stated by the Gurus that everything happens according to the Will of God. This is just an assertion about the Omnipotence of God which is inherent in any theistic concept. It actually appears in all theistic religions like Islam and Christianity. The *Quran* stresses God's complete Omnipotence in thoughts like: "His is the command and unto Him ye will be brought back. You cannot will except by the Will of Allah."¹¹, "Whom Allah Wills, he sends astray, and whom He Wills, He places on straight path."¹² "He created all things and ordained their destinies."¹³ "Everyman's destiny have we fastened on his neck. It shall be as Allah pleases."¹⁴

Similarly, Jesus prayed before his crucification, "My Father! If it is possible, let this cup be taken away from me. But I want Your Will, not mine."¹⁵ It only indicates that it is God's Will that is operative. God is 'the First and the Last' both in Christianity and Islam.

He being the Sole Entity, the question of anyone else's will does not arise. He makes the laws, and, yet, in all theistic religions the emphasis on morality is primary. There is no contradiction between the two ideas. Man has the choice to ignore God's Will. God being the Ocean of Virtues, His Will is moral. But man can and does flout it. Unless man has the freedom to make decisions, the question of his being responsible or being blamed for evil and sin cannot arise. But, in the Gurus' system, moral life is the only way to spiritual achievement.

Similarly, it is the chief obligation and characteristic of the superman to lead a life of virtue. It would just be naive to suggest that the concept of the Omnipotence of God and the primacy of God's Will leads to the negation of moral life. Such a deterministic concept is contrary to the teachings of Guru Granth Sahib, for the entire responsibility for leading a moral life is on man. In Sikhism, moral life and spiritual life are one and the same. Moral life is the way to the spiritual progress and spiritual life is spontaneously moral.

Even from the last prayer of Jesus it is evident that he could act according to his own will, but he did not want to escape crucifixion if it was God's Will. But he had the option which he exercised in favour of God's Will being done. This is exactly the difference between a theistic system like Sikhism and a pantheistic, monistic system or a deterministic one where man has no responsibility. This is illustrated by the story of a sinner. After his death, he was, because of his misdeeds, barred by Agni-Rudra from entering the realm of the sun or heaven. But the man's reply to the deity was that God being witness to all his deeds and having made him to do everything, he was blameless. The logic of the argument was accepted by the God, and he was admitted into heaven."¹⁶ As against this, in Sikhism, every man is responsible for his deeds. The validity of moral life forms the very fundamental tenet of the Guru's system. The concept of a God of Will does not in any way conflict with the concept of a God of Attributes and Values and One who is Ever-creative. Guru Granth Sahib repeatedly stresses that the responsibility for good or evil acts is that of the individual. This idea is presented ironically when it is said that "with torch in hand, one falls in well."¹⁷ It means that we have both the freedom and the responsibility to avoid vice. It is the character of the choice we make that indicates the level of our growth and the sense of our freedom and responsibility.

Mankind's religious future may be obscure; yet one thing can be foreseen. The living higher religions are going to influence each other more than ever before, in the days of increasing communications between all parts of the world and branches of human race. In this' coming religious debate, the Sikh religion and its scriptures, the Guru Granth, will have something special of value to say to the rest of the world.

- *Arnold Toynbee*
Foreword, Sacred Writings of the Sikhs
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