

## THE IDEA OF FREEDOM AND RESPONSIBILITY IN SIKHISM

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The question of freedom and necessity has been a difficult one in all religions or philosophic systems. It is our purpose here to give the Guru's views on the issue. The following points, we feel, will clarify it:

- a) 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. These ideas *ipso facto* repudiate all notions about determinism or necessity.
- b) One of the greatest contributions of the Gurus is their idea of God being a Creator, Who, as God of Will and Attributes, is helping, in the world of men, an evolutionary movement towards a being who is God-centred. 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. But we find that this idea of every effect being determined by a cause breaks pitifully when we carry the series of cause and effect backwards. We have perforce to come to a dead end, or to the First Cause. To this Causeless Cause or Un-created Creative Cause, the Guru gives the name of a Creator who has a Will. A Creator with a Will implies freedom on the part of the Self-Created Creator to create. 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 of ours. Man according to the Gurus, is the chief evolutionary being. He is not only conscious, but he is also self-conscious for discernment, reflection and deliberation, which is an attribute higher than that of other animals. In the Guru Granth Sahib, there is repeated persuasion to man to avail himself of this opportunity to become a God-centred being. "This alone is your opportunity; seek within," says Kabir, "you win or lose. I have proclaimed this loudly in many ways."<sup>1</sup> "You have been given a human body; this is your opportunity to meet God."<sup>2</sup>

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.

And the final achievement is to be a God-centred man, the creative instrument of a 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 yard-stick with which the Gurus measure man and his progress.

- c) There is the moral argument which in a way is co-extensive with the argument of freedom. The Gurus call God as the Ocean of Attributes and Values and the True Judge. If everyone were governed by rigid determination, the question of any moral would not arise. In a deterministic world, words like 'true or false,' 'right or wrong,' 'good or bad,' 'helpful or harmful,' have no meaning; nor can words like, 'ought and ought not', 'regret and happiness', 'wisdom and folly', 'just and unjust', have any significance in the case of man. These are never applied to the virtually determined and mechanistic world of matter. And, yet, the entire, mystic system of the Gurus is deeply moral and ethical in its content. God is called True One, Good, Just, Benevolent and Shelter of the shelterless. In the *Dharam Khand*, the Guru calls our world the very place of righteousness and all human assessment and approval being based on the character of man's deeds. If human actions are determined, they can hardly be called deeds, much less can they have a moral character or be judged by the yard-stick of righteousness. No one can be morally assessed unless he has the freedom of choice which he exercises voluntarily. The Guru's entire emphasis is to persuade and exhort man to exercise the right choice. They blame man for his pain and frustration since these follow from his wrong choice of deeds. The way out is to be moral and righteous, i.e., to be more free, responsible and creative. It is by this increasing choice of freedom and righteousness that man becomes God-centred, a synonym for release and freedom from comparative necessity and determinism.
- d) It would be necessary to state that 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. There are hymns in the Guru Granth Sahib, which clearly controvert deterministic *karmic* doctrine by saying that, *if karma is invariable, how did the first being inherit karma, or who created karma initially.*<sup>3</sup> You say, that body was made of five elements, from where were the elements created? You say that man is bound by his *karma*, who empowered the *karma*? "When there was no father, mother, body and *Karma*, when you were not there, I was not there, what came from where? When there was no Veda and Shastra, from where did *karma* originate?" And then there is the basic idea of grace over-riding and controverting

the doctrine of *karma*. The ideas of creativity and growth are an integral part of the Gurus' view of God and morality. It is wrong to make distinctions of caste, colour, high and low<sup>6</sup>. If one sees God in all men, one becomes godly<sup>7</sup>. We know right from wrong and yet fall into the well with torch in hand.<sup>8</sup>

The Guru says distinctly that God creates man and leaves him free to decide things. The Lord created the world and left it free to do as it wills. "Good and bad deeds are adjudged in His Court. According to their deed, some are near and some far (from God)"<sup>10</sup> God assesses everyone according to his deeds.<sup>11</sup> "Man is blessed with the light of reason and discrimination."<sup>12</sup> "One has to account for every moment and suffer for his doings."<sup>13</sup> "Walk on the straight path, otherwise you would receive a push."<sup>14</sup> "The seeker discriminates between good and bad."<sup>15</sup> "God creates the world and yokes everybody to his task."<sup>16</sup> "Earth is the true abode of righteousness."<sup>17</sup> "Serve God with a clean heart."<sup>18</sup>

All these utterances from the Guru Granth Sahib clearly envisage freedom on the part of man to make any decision he likes as to his deeds. Were man rigidly governed by his past, and the course of his present and future actions determined by what he had already done, all these exhortations to man to create his future would be without the importance and significance the Gurus attach to them. They evidently do not accept the validity of any karmic or deterministic law. Instead they pointedly stress the freedom of man to choose the course of his activities. It is only on this basis that all the above utterances of the Gurus can be explained.

True, there are sayings like "why blame another, it is our own doing that leads us astray."<sup>19</sup> It is also true that the idea of "as you sow, so shall you reap"<sup>20</sup> is there; but all this only fortifies the principle of free will and moral responsibility of man. There is nothing in this to endorse a deterministic *karmic* doctrine of traditional Brahmanism. The latter idea has been specifically refuted in the Guru Granth Sahib. The idea of "as you sow, so shall you reap," is just appeal and exhortation to the rationality and limited sovereignty of man, so as to invoke his sense of initiative, responsibility and growth.

Another point needs clarification here. It has been stated by the Gurus that everything happens according to the Will of God. This is 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 says "His is the command and unto Him ye will be brought back." "Whom Allah Wills, he sendeth astray, and whom He Wills, He placeth on straight path." "Allah's is the final judgement." "Not a leaf falleth but He knoweth it."

Similarly, Jesus prays before his crucifixion, "Father, if You are willing, please take away this cup of horror from me, but I want Your Will, not mine." It only indicates that it is God's Will that is operative. God is the first and the last both in Christianity and Islam. God is Omnipotent. He being the Sole Entity, the question of any other's will does not arise. His is the only Will. And yet in all theistic religions the emphasis on morality is primary. Unless man has the freedom and choice to make decisions, the question of man's responsibility and blame for evil, or the very idea of sin, cannot arise and has no meaning. In fact, moral life is the only way to the spiritual achievement after which the superman's responsibility for moral life becomes doubly great. Therefore, it would be just naive to suggest that the concept of the Omnipotence of God and the primacy of God's Will lead to a deterministic movement and the negation of moral life, God's Will is moral, God being the Ocean of Attributes. As it is, nothing would be more contrary to the teachings of Guru Granth Sahib, which lays repeated stress on righteous deeds. The entire responsibility for moral life is on man, because in Sikhism moral life and spiritual life are inter-related. The Guru says God created the world and left it free to do as it wills.<sup>21</sup>

Even from the last prayer of Jesus it is evident that Jesus could do his will but did not want to escape the horror of crucifixion against God's Will. But he had the option which he exercised in favour of God's Will being done. Man has the choice to do his own will or that of God. That is exactly the difference between a theistic system like Sikhism and a pantheistic or monistic system where man has no responsibility. This is illustrated by the story of a murderer and a sinner. After death, he was barred entrance into heaven by Indra because of his misdeeds. But the man's reply 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 Indra and he was admitted into heaven. As against it, in Sikhism man is not only responsible for his deeds, but all his assessment is made by God on his righteousness or otherwise. In fact, this freedom of choice becomes the very basis of all moral life, man's assessment and his progress. In Sikhism, higher than Truth is truthful conduct, and thus the validity of the moral life forms the very fundamental tenet of the system. The concept of a God of Will is in no sense conflicting with the concept of the God of Attributes and Values and One Who is Ever Creative. The Guru Granth Sahib repeatedly stresses the responsibility of man to choose good instead of evil. It says, "With torch in hand one falls in the well."<sup>22</sup> We have both the freedom and the responsibility to be away from the well. It is the character of the choice we make that indicates the level of our growth and our sense of freedom and responsibility.

I am for freedom of religion and against all manoeuvres to bring about a legal ascendancy of one sect over another.

— Jefferson

Those who deny freedom to others deserve it not for themselves, and under a *just* God cannot long retain it.

— **Lincoln**