

Interfaith Dialogue: The Sufi and Sikh Perspective

Jagbir Singh*

In the present-day globalized world, comprising of diverse cultural traditions and religious identities, the significance of interfaith dialogue can hardly be over-emphasized. The processes of globalization have turned our planet into a virtual 'global village' where people of diverse faiths and cultural traditions are obliged to share the common social space out of sheer necessity. In this 'global' village the diversity of faiths is often exploited by divisive forces to create conflicts and tensions in society. In such an environment, interfaith dialogue and understanding is the only alternative available to us to create an atmosphere of communal harmony and peaceful co-existence. Ours is a country composed of diverse ethnic/cultural identities and multiple religious denominations. The atmosphere of traditional communal harmony is presently under grave threat due to clever machinations of the global players as well as due to misguided elements in our own society. These elements are creating an atmosphere of mistrust and tensions in our socio-cultural sphere. Recognition of each other's beliefs and practices is a pre-condition for communal harmony and peaceful co-existence. The need for interfaith dialogue and understanding has become all the more important in such a situation.

Dialogue is a mode of knowledge and understanding used in interpersonal communication. It is natural to human beings in their existential concerns. Most important thing in dialogue is the world view of the participants which needs to be taken into account. In a genuine dialogue the self and the other are present to each other as authentic beings. It calls for openness and equality and the readiness to discard false appearances. Dialogue involves the encounter of different perspectives, views and worlds. It can be either spoken or silent. Therefore the key to dialogue is respect for the other, a willingness to listen, and a readiness to learn.

Various dimensions of the faith along with its spiritual and ritual practices come under the scope of such interfaith interactions. Such dialogue promotes understanding and acceptance

* Former Professor and Head, Department of Punjabi, University of Delhi

of each other's faiths. In the words of a renowned academician, Dr. Hans Küng, "There will be no peace among the nations without peace among the religions. There will be no peace among the religions without dialogue among the religions"¹. The present paper aims at studying interfaith dialogue from the perspective of Sufism and Sikhism.

First of all let us look at the Sufi perspective on interfaith dialogue. In the contemporary world the issues of interfaith dialogue are proving more problematic within the faiths of Abrahamic Civilization, especially between Christianity and Islam. But the position of Sufism is entirely different. It seeks the basis for interfaith dialogue in the essence of religion (the inner core of Islam) and not in the outward manifestations of form. It emphasizes faith, belief and spiritual content of religion. The one idea that all religions have in common, is 'God' and a belief in Him. As Jelaluddin Rumi suggests, it is this very essence which is hidden behind the apparent world. The essence of religion not only paves the way for dialogue, it permeates human nature. It occupies an important place in Islamic mysticism. Sufis are considered to be the representatives of this mystic trend in Islam. They have played a significant role in this direction which is all the more important in present context. Consequently, for dialogue between different faiths we should start from the perspective of religious mysticism, which has been regarded by many as a solution to contemporary problems, claiming: "Never before in history was it more urgent for all of us to learn the language of the mystics than in our time, when division threatens to destroy us. The mystics of every tradition speak a language that unites."

The idea of religious truth and mystico-ethical experience are two major areas around which a fruitful interfaith dialogue can be conducted. Actually these are higher levels of dialogical process. When we try to explore the true essence of faith hidden behind outward manifestations its symbolic structure (myth, metaphor and ritual) we can discern an idea of ultimate reality or truth which runs underneath. Similarly, when we explore mystical traditions from within any religion, we often feel a strong affinity for each other. The mystic paths are a well-trodden route within each religion. They project the essential unity of all faiths underlying their outward diversity. That is why they provide an authentic starting point for an exploration of the issue of truth by people of different faiths.

The attitude or approach most conducive to interfaith dialogue is religious pluralism. Basically, it is an attitude or policy of accepting and respecting the “other”. It also signifies the recognition and acceptance of diversity of religious beliefs and practices. Rejecting the exclusive right to ‘truth’, it holds the view that there are many and diverse paths to truth which is one and universal. According to this view the spiritual essence of all the diverse faiths points to the universal ultimate reality. This type of religious pluralism is the most essential element for a genuine interfaith dialogue. From this perspective Sufism has played a very significant role. Sufi mysticism emphasizes the inner spiritual meaning of the sacred scripture (the holy Qur'an). The Qur'an is considered to be the sourcebook of Islamic principles and values. Islamic views on religious pluralism are found in certain passages of the Qur'an. For instance we can look at the following verses which can be generally interpreted as an evidence of religious pluralism:

“If Allah so willed, he would have made you a single People, but his plan is to test each of you separately, in what He has given to each of you: so strive in all virtues as in you are in a race. The goal of all of you is to Allah. It is He that will show you the truth of the matters in which ye dispute.” (Qur'an 5:48)

“And dispute not with the People of the Book, except with means better than mere disputation, unless I be with those of them who inflict wrong and injury, but say to them: "We believe in the revelation which has come down to us and in that which came down to you; Our God and your God is one; and it is to Him that we bow.” (Qur'an 29:46)

“Say: O people of the Scripture! Come to an agreement between us and you: that we shall worship none but Allah and that we shall ascribe no partner to Him, and that none of us shall take others for Lords beside Allah.” (Qur'an, 3:64)

There are certain other passages in this scripture that have a significant bearing on interfaith and inter-civilizational dialogue. These include an explicit recognition of religious and cultural diversity and an emphasis on the creation of a culture of peace and amity. Its Universalist orientation is also reflected in its view of prophecy. The Quran says that God has sent down prophets to all peoples and to all parts of the world (Qur'an 35:24). Muslims are required to believe not only in the prophecy of Muhammad but in that of all other divine messengers. As a faith peaceful coexistence and tolerance are the cardinal features of Islam. The

Qur'an states that there is no place in Islam for compulsion in religious matters (Qur'an 2:256; 109:6). In fact, there are two types of directives regarding interfaith dialogue in Islam. Islam calls upon the Muslims to promote interfaith dialogue but it imposes certain conditions.

Sufism emphasizes on love as a central attribute of a believer and focuses on love for others. As Gülen observes, "Love is the most essential element of every being, and it is the most radiant light, and it is the greatest power; able to resist and overcome all else."² He uses the metaphor of the famous Sufi poet Mawlana Rumi to explain how one can be both rooted in one's own tradition, but open to others: "such a person is like a compass with one foot well-established in the center of belief and Islam and the other foot with people of many nations."³

According to a contemporary scholar, Qazi Javed, there are two types of Sufism: one is based on the metaphysics of Wahdatul Wajood; while the other is derived from the philosophy of Wahdatul Shahood. These two types are diametrically opposed to each other so far as their social and cultural implications are concerned.⁴

The first type, which is usually referred to as wajoodi Sufism, teaches tolerance, moderation, peaceful coexistence and humanistic values. This is because its metaphysics implies that there is a unity and oneness in all that exists. The differences, disagreements and divisions among human beings, ideas and all that exists are illusory. They come into being only when we look at things and matters in a limited and biased perspective and fail to see their true reality.⁵

For a Sufi, if all differences are illusory, then it clearly means that mutual differences of human beings, creeds and cultures are also superficial. They are absurd in the ultimate sense. We should sympathize with those who take these differences seriously and not detest them. The metaphysics of Wahdatul Shahood, on the other hand, insists on differences and accords primacy to them. In fact, the philosophy of Wahdatul Wajood is Indian in its essence. Its origin can be traced to Vedanta. This philosophy was adopted in the early stages of Islamic mysticism. It is commonly believed that Sufism could never have flourished without having accepted this philosophy as its ideological foundation.⁶

Now we turn to Sikh perspective on interfaith dialogue. Sikhism is one of the four major *dharma* traditions of Indic Civilization, namely, the Santana *dharma* or Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism and Sikhism. Pluralism and inclusiveness are the intrinsic qualities of all the faiths of

this civilization. Here a well-known *Rig Vedic* hymn readily comes to our mind – *ekam sad vipra bahudhā vadanti*⁷ - (Truth is one, though the sages call it by many names). As a core tenet of all the faiths of Indic Civilization, it is an expression of authentic pluralistic vision, emphasizing oneness of truth/reality and its diverse manifestations. Accepting the possibility and efficacy of equally valid alternate routes to Truth it lays the firm foundations for an interfaith dialogue.

In *Guru Granth Sahib* the same core tenet of the multiple paths to Reality/Truth is expressed in various forms at many places. For instance Guru Nanak in Sri Raga states: *Ekā surati jete hai jā, surati vihūnā koe na kīa, Jehī surati tehā tina rāhu*.⁸ (One is the awareness among all beings. No one has been created without this awareness. As is their awareness, so is their way). Whichever path a *jīva* takes in life ultimately depends on the state of its awareness. Guru Gobind Singh, the tenth Sikh Guru, has also posited the similar view of man and his approach towards the Supreme Being. In one of his compositions included in *Dasam Granth* he states: *Āpi āpanī buddhi hai jetī. barnat bhinna bhinnu tuhi tetī*.⁹ (Depending on the intellect at our disposal, each one of us describes you in diverse terms). In Rag Bilaval Guru Amar Das states: *jagatu jalāndā rakkhi lai āpaṇī kirpā dhāri. jitu duārai ubarai titai lai hu ubāri*.¹⁰ (The fire of suffering is consuming the world, have mercy, save it. Whichever be the door to liberation, lead it to save itself)

Pluralism is an article of faith in Sikhism. It is not just toleration or acceptance of diversity. It is an engagement with the diversity of co-existing faiths in society. In real sense of the term, pluralism means active participation in a two-way process of interaction for gaining knowledge and understanding of each other's faith. In other words pluralism is more than tolerance of differences. It also requires knowledge and appreciation of diversity. Moreover pluralism does not mean abandoning the distinctiveness of our own faith.

Dialogue in the real sense is possible among the equals. To engage 'the other' in a genuine dialogue process, we need to treat him as our equal, which is most conducive attitude for a meaningful dialogue on matters of faith. The discourse of *Guru Granth Sahib* deals with the idea of 'the other' from a philosophical perspective. In Rag Gauri Guru Nanak states in clear terms: *dūjā kauṇu kahā nahī koī. sabha mahi eku niraṇjanu soī*.¹¹ (Who is the other? and where he is? There is on one. There is only one Supreme Being who is all-pervading). This

metaphysical concept of the unity of all existence is the foundation on which the whole edifice of Sikh world view is raised. This unitive consciousness does not treat anyone as alien or other. Recognizing the Supreme Being as creator and sustainer of the created universe inspires us to treat all beings as equals.

In fact Guru Arjan Dev goes one step ahead. He places the ‘other’ in the category of a friend which is recognized as a relationship among equals. In practice our relationship with the other become problematic when there is enmity between us on any account. There is a beautiful statement to this effect in Dhanasri Rag by Guru Arjan Dev: *nā ko merā dusmanu rahiā nā hama kisa ke bairāī. Brahman pasāru pasārio bhītari satigura te sojhī pāī. sabhu ko mītu hama āpana kīnā hama sabhanā ke sājana.*¹² (No one has remained an enemy for me, and I am no one's enemy. The Supreme Being, who expanded His expanse, is within us all; I learned this from the True Guru. I have friendliness for all beings and I am a friend of everyone.

This attitude of friendliness for all *jīvas* has been expressed in one of the seminal texts of Indic Civilization, *Yajur Veda: mittarasya mā cakṣuṣā sarvāṇi bhūtāni smīkṣamītām.*¹³ (Let all the *jīva-s* look towards me with a gaze of friendliness)

The insight expressed in this text is representative of cosmic vision where all enmity is dissolved. It is a prayer invoking the emotion of mutual friendliness in all the *jīvas* of the universe. In Buddhism also the significance of friendliness has been emphasized in a forceful manner. In Buddhist *dharma* tradition *karuṇā* (compassion) and *maitrī* (friendliness) are considered two cardinal virtues for realization and attainment of salvation (*nirvāṇa*). The text and discourse of *Guru Granth Sahib* follows these glorious traditions of Indic *dharma* traditions. As a matter of fact the pluralism of the Sikh Scripture has its roots in the non-dualistic perception of Ultimate Reality which is all-pervading. It perceives one Lord (*prabhu*) in the whole of creation. For illustration some of the verses are quoted below:

Perceive the presence of Atam and Rama in all beings.

The perfect One is all-pervading.¹⁴

The Sikh Scripture gives due space to the separate identity of different religious communities along with their distinctive beliefs and practices. This awareness is portrayed in Raga Ramkali where Guru Arjan Dev observes:

Some call Him, 'Ram, Ram', and some call Him, 'Khuda-i'.

Some serve Him as 'Gusain', others as 'Allah'.

He is the Cause of causes, the Generous Lord.

He showers His Grace and Mercy upon us. ¹⁵

A similar semiotic strategy is at work in the following verses of Kabir: “If Allah lives only in the mosque, then to who does the rest of the world belong?”¹⁶ It is the context in which the following statement of Kabir in Rag Prabhati can be gainfully interpreted: *Beda Kateb kaho mat jhūṭhe jhūṭhā jo na bicārai.* ¹⁷(Do not say the Vedas or the sacred Books are false, false are the people who do not contemplate on them). This philosophical vision of cosmic consciousness is the trade mark of the ideology of Sikh Scripture. In Rag Ramkali, Guru Arjan Dev says in a mood of prayer:

Be kind and compassionate to me, O Creator Lord.

Bless me with devotion and meditation, O Creator.

Says Nanak, the Guru has rid me of all doubt.

Allah and Parbrahm are the same.¹⁸

‘Allah’ and ‘Brahman’ are the prime signifiers of the two religious traditions (the Muslim and the Hindu). The discursive strategy of the text of *Guru Granth Sahib* here is inclusiveness. By indicating the spiritual unity/oneness of these signifiers, peaceful co-existence and communal harmony is emphasized. Such a unifying consciousness emerges only in an atmosphere of inter-faith dialogue and understanding. This is precisely the ideological position of the Gurus, Saints and Sufis whose compositions have been included in this sacred text.

The discourse of Gurbani posits the idea of Ultimate Reality which is both transcendent and immanent at the same time. In its response to Islam it attempts to assimilate the monotheistic idea of personal transcendent God into its fold in an inclusive manner. This interfaith dialogical response is beautifully expressed in the discursive universe of *Guru Granth Sahib*. For instance in Rag Ramkali Guru Nanak states: “He Himself is near at hand, and He is far away. He Himself is all-pervading, permeating everywhere.”¹⁹ Again in the same Rag, “Your Light is prevailing everywhere. Wherever I look, there I see the Lord.”²⁰ The terms used for transcendence and immanence are taken from spoken idiom – *nerai* (near) *dūri* (far away) for ease of

communication. These efforts at synthesizing of opposing concepts relating to two different Civilizations reflects the spirit of renaissance ushered by medieval Bhakti movement. In this context the following verses from *Dasam Granth* are most relevant: *kahūn veda rīta, kahūn tāsion viparīta; kahūn triguṇa atīta kahūn sarguna smeta ho.*²¹ (Somewhere you work in accordance with Vedic rites and somewhere quite opposed to these; Somewhere you are devoid of the three attributes and somewhere you are present with all these attributes). The spirit of this synthesis is reflected in the underlying unity of all faiths in another verse of Guru Gobind Singh: “The temple and the mosque are the same, the *pūjā* and the *namāz* are the same, all men are the same; it is through erroneous judgment they appear different ... All men have the same eyes, the same ears, the same body, the same build, a compound of earth, air, fire and water ... let no man, even by mistake, suppose there is a difference.”²²

In ‘Siddha Gosti’ composition of Guru Nanak we find an excellent example of interfaith dialogue. Composed in conversational style, it is a poetic rendering of dialogical exchange of views between Siddhas (the ascetics or Jogis) and Guru Nanak. It is comparatively a long composition containing 73 poetic stanzas, the main theme of which relates to two divergent world views - the Siddha and the Gurmat world views. The composition begins with an invocation to Supreme Being and a show of reverence for the assembly of the learned (the Siddhas and the Sants): The Siddhas, sitting in their traditional posture, formed an assembly shouted, ‘Salute this gathering of Saints.’ I offer my salutation to the One who is true, infinite and incomparably beautiful. I cut off my head, and offer it to Him; I dedicate my body and mind to Him. O Nanak, meeting with the Saints, Truth is obtained, and one is spontaneously blessed with distinction.”²³ This invocatory piece also contains an indication of the central theme of the composition in the following statement: *Kiā bhavīai saci sūcā hoi. Sāca sabada binu mukati na koi.* (What is the use of wandering around? Purity comes only through Truth. Without the True Word of the Shabad, no one finds liberation.)²⁴

The attitude of reverence for the contending party (the other) of the dialogue, as expressed here, is a traditional convention of our Indian culture. It creates an appropriate atmosphere congenial to interfaith dialogue where differences of opinion in matters of beliefs and practices are sought to be clarified and resolved if possible. Such an interfaith dialogue, if

conducted with good will and honesty, can provide an excellent opportunity to understand each other's philosophical positions and theological assumptions better. It is a win-win situation for both parties.

The Siddhas ask a pertinent philosophical question: "The world is said to be an ocean which is treacherous and impassable; how can one cross over?" The answer is also forthcoming – "As the lotus flower floats untouched upon the surface of the water, and the duck swims effortlessly through the stream; with one's consciousness focused on the *sabda* (Word/vehicle of liberative knowledge), one crosses over this terrifying world-ocean. Nanak, chants the Name (of the Lord). One who lives alone, as a hermit, enshrining the One Lord in his mind, remaining unaffected by hope in the midst of hope and sees and inspires others to see the inaccessible, unfathomable Lord. Nanak is his slave."²⁵ Here the classical symbol of a lotus flower growing in water drawing its sustenance from the mud below and yet remaining untouched by it has also been used to illustrate the point that man can live a detached life in this world and realize the Supreme Lord by enshrining His Name in his heart. So has been the symbol of the duck swimming in water without wetting its wings.²⁶

In this composition the true spirit of interfaith dialogue is maintained in accepting the validity of Truth possessed by the contending party. But the Guru is able to show the hollowness of certain ritual practices using the conceptual terminology of Siddha world view and way of life. According to Guru Nanak meditating on the unchanging Truth (the Name or essence of Supreme Being) and living a life of detached attachment is the only way to liberation. In fact, the entire text of *Guru Granth Sahib* is full of such insights which are relevant for an effective interfaith dialogue in our contemporary context as it was so in its original historical context.

Notes and references:

¹ Musser, D & Sunderland, D. (2005) *War or Words: Interreligious Dialogue as an Instrument of Peace*. Cleveland: The Pilgrim Press, 1.

² Gülen, 2004: 1

³ Kurtz 2005: 375-7.

⁴ Javed, Qazi, *Panjab Di Suftiyannah Rivayat*, Lahore: Punjabi Adabi Board.

⁵ *Ibid*

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ *Rig Veda* 1.164.46.

⁸ *Guru Granth Sahib*, 25.

⁹ *Dasam Granth*

¹⁰ *Guru Granth Sahib*, 853.

¹¹ *Ibid*, 223.

¹² *Ibid*, 671.

¹³ *Yajur Veda*. 36.10.18.

¹⁴ *Ātam Rāmu sarab mahi pekhu.*

Pūran pūri rahiā prabh eku.

Guru Granth Sahib, 892.

¹⁵ *Koī bolai Rāma Rāma koī Khudāe.*

Koī sevai Gosaiān koī Alahi.

Kāraṇa karaṇa karīm. Kirpā dhār Rahīm.

Koī nāvai tīrathi koī hajja jāe. Koī kare pūjā koī sira nivāe.

Koī parhe Beda koī Kateb. Koī odhai nīla koī supeda.

Koī kahai Turaku koī kahe Hindū.

Koī bāchai bhisatu koī surgindū.

Kahu Nānak jini hukamu pachātā.

Prabha sahib kā tini bhedu jātā.

Ibid, 885.

¹⁶ *Ibid*, 1349.

¹⁷ *Ibid*, 1350.

¹⁸ *Mihar dayā kari karnaihara.*

Bhagati baṇdagī dehi sirjaṇhara.

Kaho Nanak guri khoye bharam.

Eko Allahu Parbarahm.

Ibid, 897.

¹⁹ *Āpe nerai āpe dūri.*

Āpe sarab rahiā bharpūri.

Ibid, 876.

²⁰ *Ibid*, 876.

²¹ *Dasam Granth*

²² *Ibid*, p – 51.

²³ *Siddha sabhā kari āsaṅI baiṭhe saṅta sabhā jaikāro.*

Tisu āgai raharāsi hamārī sēcā apara apāro.

Masataku kāṭi dharī tisu āgai tanu manu āgai deo.

Nānaka saṅtu milai sacu pāiai sahaja bhāI jasu leo.

Guru Granth Sahib, 938)

²⁴ *Guru Granth Sahib, 938.*

²⁵ *Dunīā sāgaru dutaru kahīe kio kari pāiai pāro?*

Jaise jala mahi kamalu nirālamu muragāi nai sāṅe.

Surati sabadi bhava sāgaru tarīai Nānaka nāmu vakhāṅe

Rahahi ikāṅṅti eko mani vasiā āsā mahi nirāso.

Agamu agocarū dekhi dikhāe Nānaku tā kā dāso.

Ibid , 938.

²⁶ <http://www.thesikhencyclopedia.com/>