

## WHAT IS THE BEST RELIGION?

Spread your prayer mat by conquering your five desires,  
and you will recognize the true religion (sggs 480).  
The Shabad or Naam is the Insignia of the One True Lord.  
Through the Perfect Guru, the All-Knowing Lord is known.  
If someone grasp this thing,  
there is only one Religion of Truth (sggs 1188).



So many forms of religion have been described in the human history; the whole world is practicing them in some form. However, very rare and fortunate ones practice them with intuitive wisdom, while the others practice them with sense-blind mind.

God is one but His names are infinite. Thus, there are infinite paths and opinions. But, the Lord can be realized by the means of all paths; because it is the same God which is invoked by different names. All that is needed is the inner love or earnest yearning ('*Taalaabeli*') for Him!

- *Asankh jap asankh bhaayu. Asankh pooja asankh tap taayu. Asankh granth mukhi ved paath. Asankh Yog manni rahahi udaas*: Countless are meditations, countless are loves. Countless are worship services, countless are austere disciplines. Countless are scriptures and recitations of the Vedas. Countless are Yogis, whose minds remain detached from the world (sggs 3).
- *Mohe laagtee taalaabeli....*: I am restless and unhappy (without the Lord's Naam). (Just as) without her calf, the cow is lonely; without water, the fish writhes in pain. So is poor Naam Dev without the Lord's Name (sggs 874).

The underlying function or the ultimate objective of any genuine religion is killing of the false ego, that is, attainment of Self-realization. In other words, the purpose of religion is to know the Supreme Truth and man's relationship with Him. Therefore, a true religion is that which teaches living entities as to what actions will bring them emancipation from material bondage (suffering), and total perfection.

Thus, a religion is not a declaration of such noble objectives, it is an action to fulfill these objectives. In other words, religion is meant to be practical, not theoretical; for it's good to speak wisely, but the best of all is to act wisely (practice). Any religion devoid of this central intention can not be called a religion. It may be called a mundane business, but it certainly can not be called an Eternal Dharma.

This brings us to the basic question: What is the best religion? Does Gurbani provide answer to this fundamental question? If yes, are we aware of the Gurbani's position and teaching in this context? In the Divine Light of the Gurbani (Sri Guru Granth Sahib, SGGS), this article will attempt to reflect on as what constitutes a true religion.

First, let us find out as to what constitutes a religious person. Gurbani declares that a person can not be a religious unless he possesses the Spiritual Wisdom or Self-knowledge (*Aatam Giyan*). However, unfortunately, many of us try to become religious before gaining the True Knowledge. It is like placing a cart before the horse!

- *Jin aatam tat na cheeniyaa; Sabh fokat dharma abeeniyaa*: Whoever does not gain the knowledge of the Self, all his religious acts are vain and blind (sggs 1351).

- *Kabira jahaa gian tah dharam hai jhaa jhooth tah paap; Jahaa lobh tah kaal hai jhaa khimaa tah aap*: Says Kabir: where there is Knowledge, there is Dharma, and where there is falsehood, there is sin; where there is greed, there is death and where there is forgiveness, there is God Himself (sggs 1372).

The above verses of the Gurbani make it very clear that a person can not be a truly religious without knowledge of the Self and knowledge of God. Knowledge of the Self is believing in one's own Self as *Aatma* only, and discarding the consciousness of the physical body. After realizing one's own Self as *Aatma*, when one becomes linked to *Parmatama*, one is said to have attained the knowledge of God.

- *Man tu jot sroop hai apnaa mool pashaan*: O my soul, you are the image of Divine Light, so know your source (sggs 441).
- *Aatam mahi Ram ram mahi aatam cheenas Gur beecharaa*: The Lord is in the soul, and the soul is in the Lord. This is realized through the Guru's Teachings (1153).

One can go across a river by mere swimming. However, in order to cross an ocean, one needs the help of a ship. This material world is likened to an dreadful ocean of desires and fear, and resulting actions. In order to overcome such mighty ocean, one requires the help of Spiritual Wisdom, unflinching devotion, and dedication to God.

Due to lack of such spiritual awareness, a person becomes victim of seductive objects that seduce his respective sense-organs. One who has no knowledge of the Self as *Aatma* and who has grossly identified himself with his gross body and the false ego attached to it becomes unfit for receiving Spiritual Wisdom. Such person can not ascend the Divine ladder.

Where such divine wisdom (*Giyan* or Self-knowledge) is to be found? It is hidden within! It is not perceived by reading books, rolling beads, listening to sermons, attending meetings or seminars, attaining degrees or titles, and then turning around giving lectures to others or repeating what we have heard. This intuitive understanding is gained through the true devotion (*Naam*-consciousness). When we gain this understanding, the true wisdom (*Budhee*) manifests within our consciousness; without which we will not be able to understand what true religion is. With such pure understanding comes the storm of spiritual wisdom, which totally blows away our doubts, bonds of Maya, double-mindedness, emotional attachment, desires, fear, greed, self-conceit, enviousness, evil-mindedness, bad habits, weaknesses, fanaticism, stubbornness, unrighteousness, etc.

- *Nangaa giaan nahee mukh baatayu. anik jugat sastar kari bhaatayu. giaanee soyi jaakai drir soyoo. kahat sunat kashoo yog na hoyoo*: Spiritual wisdom is not obtained by mere words of mouth. It is not obtained through the various debates of the Shaastras and scriptures. They alone are spiritually wise, whose minds are firmly fixed on the Lord. By just hearing and telling stories, no one attains Yoga (sggs 251).
- *Giaan dhyaan Gurshabad hai meethaa*: Spiritual wisdom and meditation come to those unto whom the Shabad is sweet (sggs 162).

A false pride of becoming a religious person becomes veil to one's own oneness with the Universal Consciousness, thus a block to one's own enlightenment. Due to spiritual ignorance, one falls victim to entanglements of useless religious rituals, which bind him to Maya (cosmic illusion). The Gurbani emphasizes that the religion is not a matter of outer rituals or dogmatism. It is a man's inner surrender to God's *Shabad* or eternal teachings.

- *Bandhan karam dharma hayu keeyaa*: A false pride of being religionist will bind or entangle one

to this material body (sggs 416).

- *karam dharam sabh bandhanaa paap pun sanbandh*: The religious rituals are all entanglements; the bad and the good are all bound up with them (sggs 551).
- *Kahoo jugati kitai na paaeeai Dharma*: Naam cannot be obtained by any religious rituals (sggs 274).

Of all the religions, what is the **best religion**? According to SGGS, the best religion is to chant the Name of the Lord (*Bhagti* or devotion) and maintain pure conduct (mental purity). Of all religious acts, the most sublime act is to erase the filth of the dirty mind in the Company of the devoted souls. Of all religious efforts, the best effort is to chant the Name of the Lord in the heart, forever. Of all religious speech, the most ambrosial speech is to hear the Lord's Praise and chant it with the tongue. Of all religious places, the most sublime place is that heart in which the Name of the Lord abides.

- *Sarab dharam mahi sareest dharam; hari ko naam jap nirmal karam*: Of all the religions, the **best religion** is to repeat God's name and do pious deeds (sggs 266).

Of all the religions, what is the **eternal religion**? The Gurbani asserts that abandoning the mental delusion (duality) and reflecting on the Lord's Name is the eternal religion. One may distinguish between good and evil actions, and listen to the scriptures, but doubt still may persist in his mind. Skepticism and ego may continually dwell in his heart. Outwardly, one may bathe and wash with water at so called religious places, but deep within, his heart still may be tarnished by all sorts of vices. The method of purification of such person is compare to that of an elephant, who covers himself with dust right after his bath! Then, how can we become pure? The Gurbani asserts that one can become purified by realizing the eternal religion — renouncing the doubts, and meditating upon the Lord's Name.

- *Baliyo chiraag andhaar mahi sabh kali udhree ik naam dharam*: The Name's lamp is lit in the midst of spiritual darkness; all are saved in this Dark Age of Kali Yuga through the One Name or Dharma (sggs 1387).
- *Taji sabh bharam bhajio paarbrahm. Kahu Nanak atal ih Dharma*: Renounce all your doubts, and ponder upon the Supreme Lord. Says Nanak, this is the **eternal religion** (sggs 196).

The Gurbani thunders that the entire creation is continually engaged in singing Lord's glories! Consequently, singing God's glories is said to be the **Attal or permanent** religion. It means that selfless *Kirtan* or chanting God's Name (*Naam Simran* or devotion) is the symptom or definition of a true Sikh or devotee. Accordingly, the Gurbani says that a true devotee only lives by taking the food of *Kirtan*. In other words, a true spiritual disciple is he who has made the selfless *Kirtan* his only support or religion. Singing of *Kirtan* for making money as we see at organized religious places does not constitute selfless *Kirtan*. That is a mundane business. Singing of the Holy Name as talked by the Gurbani is meant for pleasing the Lord only.

- *Nanak hari kirtan kar attal ih dharm*: O Nanak, do Hari Kirtan, this alone is the **Attal religion** (sggs 299).

What is the **pure religion**? Who is the pure Sikh or devotee? The one who follows the pure religion becomes the pure devotee, and attains the Lord. The Gurbani narrates the attributes of a purely religious person as follows:

- *Baisno so jis ooper su parsann...*: The true Vaishnaav, the devotee, is the one with whom God is thoroughly pleased. He dwells apart from Maya. Performing good deeds, he does not seek rewards. Spotlessly **pure religion** of such a Vaishnaav; he has no desire for the fruits of his labors. He is absorbed in devotional worship and the singing of Kirtan, the songs of the Lord's Glory. Within

his mind and body, he meditates in remembrance on the Lord of the Universe. He is kind to all creatures. He holds fast to the Naam, and inspires others to chant it. O Nanak, such a Vaishnaav obtains the supreme status. The true Bhagaautee, the devotee, loves the devotional worship of God. He forsakes the company of all wicked people. All doubts are removed from his mind. He performs devotional service to the Supreme Lord in all. In the Good Company, the filth of sin is washed away. The wisdom of such a Bhagaautee becomes supreme. He constantly performs the service of the Supreme Lord. He dedicates his mind and body to the Love of God. The Lotus Feet of the Lord abide in his heart. O Nanak, such a Bhagaautee attains the Lord (sggs 274).

What is the **essence of all religions**? How one can abide in this true essence of the Divinity? According to the Gurbani, the essence of all religions is the Lord's Name. It abides in the heart of those true devotees who surrender unto Him — the fortunate ones.

- *Sagal mataant keval hari Naam. Gobind bhagat kai man bisraam*: The **essence of all religions** is the Lord's Name alone; and it abides in the minds of devotees of God (sggs 296).
- *Hoye nimaanee dhahi payee miliaa sahi subhayi*: In humility, I bow down in surrender to Him, and He naturally met me (sggs 761).
- The Lord says, "Abandon all varieties of religion and just surrender unto Me. I will deliver you from all sinful reactions. Do not fear" (Gita 18-66).

Man's mind without the Lord's Name is foolish like a frog. The foregoing verses make it very clear that there is only one religion in the universe, that is, becoming immersed in the *Naam* or Love Divine. Which, according to the Gurbani, has nothing to do with any religious garbs or rituals. In fact, the nature of the *Naam* is said to be totally opposite to such outer and superficial beliefs. Once the *Naam* is awakened within, everything else will follow. Forms and names which symbolize the Truth are only indications; they are not the Truth itself, which transcends all conceptualizations. In other words, the Truth transcends the very mind which seeks to conceptualize names and forms in the first place.

- *Kahoo jugati kitai na paaeeai Dharma*: Naam (or Dharma) cannot be obtained by any rituals (sggs 274).
- *Bhekh anek agan nahee boojhai. Koti upaav dargah nahee sijhai*: Wearing various religious robes, the fire (of desire) is not extinguished; even making millions of efforts, one will not be accepted in the Court of the Lord (sggs 266).
- *Bhekh bhavnee hathh na jaanaa Nanaka sach gahi rahe*: I know of no religious bodily-dress or garbs, pilgrimages, or stubborn fanaticism; O Nanak, I only holdfast to the Truth (sggs 843).

For the spiritual progress, peace and happiness, good population in the society is very essential. Without the practice of proper religious principles outlined in the true scriptures, there will be an increase of unwanted population in the human society, causing hellish life for their families and community. The Gurbani declares such people to be unwanted burden on this earth. When such people become leaders in the community, their irresponsible activities bring chaos in the society, and consequently people forget true religion and the aim of life.

- *Visariyaa jin Naam te bhuyi bhaar theeyai*: Those who have forsaken the Lord's Name are burden on this earth (sggs 488).
- *Jinee aisaa Har Naam na chetio se kaahe jag aae Ram Raaje*: They, who did not contemplate on such a Name of God, why did they come in this world? (sggs 450).
- *Jini Har Har Naam na chetio su ayugan aavai jaai*: Those who have not contemplated the Name



of the Lord, are unworthy; they come and go in reincarnation (sggs 22).

The Waheguru pervades in everything and everywhere; including the body. The realization of this Ultimate Truth is very simple; as simple as winking of an eye or crushing of a flower in the palm! It is so because the Truth is very simple, and open to all. It is simply loving the Self which is hidden within! That's all. However, deluded mind makes simple things complicated because it will read complex and far-fetched meanings in simple things. People want complexity because they are not contented with simplicity. This is why so many religions have come into existence with their own complex adherents and antagonists! Although these religions often start good but later turn bad when they fall in the hands of those who want name and gain. Consequently, they end up in worthless rituals, ceremonies, paths, and traditions; creating fake fear of hell and death, and expectation of far-off heavens, etc.

The spirituality begins where the religion ends. Consequently, enlightenment is not the product of customary religions; for only awakened and spiritually mature can grasp the simple Truth in all its nakedness. The *Gurmat* is opposed to exclusive claims of any religion, including the Sikhism itself. The Gurbani proclaims that for anyone who is determined to practice the Truth there is **only one religion**.

- *Eko Shabad saachaa neesaan. Poore Gur te jaanai jaan. Eko Dharam drirai sach koe*: The Shabad or Naam is the Insignia of the One True Lord. Through the Perfect Guru, the All-Knowing Lord is known. If someone grasp this thing, there is **only one Religion of Truth** (sggs 1188).

Thus, the religion Gurbani talks about is not the formal or customary religion, but that eternal religion which underlies all religions, which brings us face to face with the Divine Light, because it is inherent in the soul itself. Therefore, in the Gurbani, the word religion does not mean sectarianism. It not only transcends all sectarian labels, but also gives them harmony and reality. It bestows on the sincere disciple a spiritual insight or illumination. Practice of anything less than this will bring nothing but obstructions in the form of dogmatic fanaticism, bigotry, intolerance, practice of outer and superficial rituals, fights, wars, etc., which will only take us farther away from the Source, the Supreme Lord.

- *Hari kirtan rahraas hamaaree Gurmukh panth ateetam*: The Praise of the Lord is my occupation; and to live as Gurmukh is my **pure religion** (sggs 360).

Thus, the key to becoming a truly religious person is in becoming a *Gurmukh* (spiritual being) or living a truthful life. Many of us think that the wars that are fought on the name of religion in the world are prompted by religion. If we reflect on it, we will realize that they are really not prompted by religion. Since most of us are not true spiritual beings, people have the tendency to consider one's own religion superior and thereby insist that others should join and follow it. This is the cause for most of the wars fought on the name of religion.

- *Khuraasaan khasmaanaa keeya hidustaan daaraayaa. Aapai dos na deyee kartaa jam kari mugul charhaaiaa*: Having attacked Khuraasaan, Baabar terrified Hindustan. God is not to be blamed for it; the Mugal as the messenger of death was the invader (sggs 360).
- *Manni hirdai krodh mahaa bislodh nirap dhaavahi larhi dukh paya....*: Hearts and minds filled with the horribly poisonous essence of anger, the kings fought their wars and obtained only pain. Their minds were afflicted with the illness of egotism, and their self-conceit and arrogance increased (sggs 445).
- *Hukam na jaanahi bapure bhoolahi phirahi gavaar....*: The wretched fools do not know the Lord's Will; they wander around making mistakes. They go about their business stubborn-mindedly; they are disgraced forever and ever. Inner peace does not come to them; they do not embrace love for the True Lord (sggs 66).

A truly religious person refrains saying something bad to another person that he wouldn't want someone else to say to him. Thus, those who have understood the true religion will not attack beliefs of others because they realize how much it would hurt if someone else did the same to them! They would never rejoice in another person's suffering; for they always look to their spiritual wisdom to find ways to help others overcome their problems. Such persons become loving!

The essence of religion, hence, is realizing Oneness of the Spirit, the vision of Truth. Then comes the noble moral and ethical values founded based on the understanding of this essence of religion. These aspects of religion will ever remain relevant to the mankind, thus unchanged. Without this there can be no real love, compassion, peace, harmony, and integration in the human society.

- *Jat sat sanjam Naam hai vin naavai nirmal na hoi*: The Name of the Lord is abstinence, truthfulness, and self-restraint. Without the Name, no one becomes pure (sggs 33).

Time denotes birth and death. Bound in the framework of time and space, religions exist in the ever changing world. Since the world is constantly changing, so are the religions. This change is inevitable because people are changing, their environment and conditions are changing, also their appreciation of things is changing. Therefore, only that religion will survive in the future which, keeping the essence as well as noble values intact, understands the ever changing nature of the material world and is able to adjust at the empirical level. Those religions that become very rigid, stubborn, fundamentalist, and oppose to change will disappear with time.

--T. Singh

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