

Environmental Theology in Sikhism

"Creating the world, God has made it a place to practice spirituality" (Guru Granth Sahib, page 1035.)

The Sikh scripture declares that the purpose of human beings is to achieve a blissful state and be in harmony with the earth and all creation. It seems, however, that humans have drifted away from that ideal. The earth is today saturated with problems. It is agonizing over the fate of its inhabitants and their future. It is in peril as never before. Its forests are being denuded. A smoky haze envelops the cities of the world. Its lakes and rivers are being filled with urban and industrial pollution killing aquatic life. Human beings are exploiting human beings. There is a sense of urgency in all parts of the world, across ethnic, religious, and national boundaries. The demands of national economic growth and individual needs and desires are depleting the natural resources of the earth.

There is serious concern that the earth may no longer be a sustainable bio-system. The major crises facing the earth - the social justice crisis and the environmental crisis - together are heading the earth towards a disastrous situation. The social justice crisis is that of humanity's confrontation with itself and the environmental crisis is caused by humanity's confrontation with nature.

The social justice crisis is that poverty, hunger, disease, exploitation, and injustice are widespread. There are economic wars over resources and markets. The rights of the poor and the marginal are violated. Women constituting half the world's population are excluded from public decision-making, making them even more vulnerable in situations of conflict and crisis.

The environmental crisis caused by humanity's exploitation of nature is leading to the depletion of renewable resources, destruction of forests, over-use of land for agriculture and habitation. Today pollution is contaminating air, land and water. Smoke from industries, homes and vehicles fills the air. Industrial waste and consumer trash is affecting streams and rivers, ponds and lakes. Much of the waste is a product of modern technology; it is not biodegradable, not re-usable and its long-term consequences are unknown. The viability of many animal and plant species, and possibly that of the human species itself is at stake.

This crisis cries out for an immediate and urgent solution. The crisis requires a going back to the basic question of the purpose of human beings in this universe and an understanding of ourselves and the Divine creation.

We are called to the vision of Guru Nanak which is a world society comprising God-conscious human beings who have realized God. To these spiritual beings the earth and the universe are sacred; all life is unity, and their mission is the spiritualization of all. Guru Nanak laid the foundation of Sikhism in the late fifteenth century. His writings, those of other human Gurus who succeeded him, and other spiritual leaders, are included in the scripture - Guru Granth Sahib. Guru Granth has been the Guru and Divine Master of the Sikhs since 1708, when Guru Gobind Singh declared that there would be no more human Gurus. Guru Nanak and his successors during their lifetime worked towards creating an ideal society that has as its basis spiritual awareness and ethical integrity. The name 'Sikh' means disciple or learner of the Truth.

Guru Nanak in his philosophy states that the reality that humans create around themselves is a reflection of their inner state. The current instability of the natural system of the earth - the external environment of human beings, is only a reflection of the instability and pain within humans. The increasing barrenness of the earth's terrain is a reflection of the emptiness within humans.

The solution to problems manifest in our world lies in prayer and accepting God's hukam. It is difficult to translate certain Sikh concepts accurately. Hukam is one such concept - it may be best described as a combination of God's will, order, or system. With an attitude of humility, and surrender to the Divine Spirit, conscientious human beings can seek to redress the current crises of the environment and of social justice. In the Sikh way this is done through the guidance of the Guru, who is the Living Perfection of Divine Wisdom. A Sikh theologian, Kapur Singh, explains that Sikhism has three postulates implicit in its teachings:

One, that there is no essential duality between spirit and matter. Two, that humans have the capacity to consciously participate in the process of spiritual progression. Three, the highest goal of spiritual progression is harmony with God, while remaining earth-conscious, so that the world itself may be transformed to a spiritual plane of existence.

UNITY OF SPIRIT AND MATTER AND INTERCONNECTEDNESS OF ALL OF CREATION

The Sikh view is that spirit and matter are not antagonistic. Guru Nanak declared that the spirit was the only reality and matter is only a form of spirit. Spirit takes on many forms and names under various conditions.

"When I saw truly, I knew that all was primeval. Nanak, the subtle (spirit) and the gross (material) are, in fact, identical." (Guru Granth Sahib, page 281)

That which is inside a person, the same is outside; nothing else exists; By divine

prompting look upon all existence as one and undifferentiated; The same light penetrates all existence. (Guru Granth Sahib, page 599)

The chasm between the material and the spiritual is in the minds of humans only. It is a limitation of the human condition that spirit and matter appear as duality, and their unity is not self-evident.

The material universe is God's creation. Its origin was in God and its end is in God; and it operates within God's Hukam or Divine Will. Guru Nanak declares that God alone knows the reasons for and the moment of earth's creation. The origin of the universe is unknowable. The act of creation itself, the creation of the primeval atom, was instantaneous, caused by the Will of God.

Further descriptions of the universe and its creation in Sikh scripture are remarkably similar to recent scientific speculation about the universe and its origin. One of the basic hymns in the Sikh Scripture describes the indeterminate void before the existence of this universe. (See Appendix 1.0) Guru Nanak speaks of innumerable galaxies, of a limitless universe, the boundaries of which are beyond human ability to comprehend. God alone knows the extent of creation. (Appendix 3.0) God created the universe and the world, for reasons best known to Her. And being the results of God's actions all parts of the universe are holy. God is an all-pervasive being manifest through various elements of creation. (Appendix 4.0)

Having created this universe and the world, God directs them. All actions take place within God's hukam. God alone knows how and why. God, however, not only directs this vast and massive theater, but also watches over with care and kindness-the benign, supportive parent!

Men, trees, pilgrimage places, banks of sacred streams, clouds, fields. Islands, spheres, universes, continents, solar systems. The sources of creation, egg-born, womb-born, earth-born, sweat-born, oceans, mountains and sentient beings.

He, the Lord, knows their condition, O Nanak. Nanak, having created beings, the lord takes care of them all. The creator who created the world, He takes thought of it as well. (Guru Granth Sahib, page 466)

The world, like all creation, is a manifestation of God. Every creature in this world, every plant, every form is a manifestation of the Creator. Each is part of God and God is within each element of creation. God is the cause of all and She is the primary connection between all existence.

"The Creator created himself..... And created all creation in which he is manifest. You Yourself the bumble-bee, flower, fruit and the tree. You Yourself the water, desert, ocean and the pond. You Yourself are the big fish, tortoise and the Cause of causes. Your form can not be known (Guru Granth Sahib page 1016)

In the world God has created She has also provided each species and humans with means

of support and nurturing.

In Sikh beliefs, a concern for the environment is part of an integrated approach to life and nature. As all creation has the same origin and end, humans must have consciousness of their place in creation and their relationship with the rest of creation. Humans should conduct themselves through life with love, compassion and justice. Becoming one and being in harmony with God implies that humans endeavor to live in harmony with all of God's creation.

The second postulate is that humans, practicing a highly disciplined life, while remaining active in the world, are capable of further spiritual progression. It is important that Sikhs retain the primacy of spirit over matter, while it is desirable that they do not deny matter or material existence. It is not required that humans renounce the world. They must maintain their life in the world and uphold all responsibilities in the world. Humans should be renouncers of plenty and maintain a simple life. Further spiritual progress fundamentally starts with an individual conquering himself/herself with the guidance of the Guru. (Appendix 6.0) The emphasis is on mastery over the self and the discovery of the self; not mastery over nature, external forms and beings. Sikhism teaches against a life of conspicuous, wasteful consumption. The Guru recommends a judicious utilization of material and cultural resources available to humans.

Then why get attached to what you will leave behind. Having wealth, you indulge in pleasures bout, From that, tell me, who will bail you out? All your houses, horses, elephants and luxurious cars, They are just pomp and show, all totally false.
(Guru Granth Sahib)

The Gurus taught humans to be aware of and respect the dignity in all life, whether human or not. Such a respect for life can only be fostered where one can first recognize the Divine spark within oneself, see it in others, cherish it, nurture and fulfill it.

This little shrine of the human body! This great opportunity of life! The object is to meet the Beloved, thy Master!
(Guru Granth Sahib)

SPIRITUAL DISCIPLINE

Humans have the capability to further their spiritual progression through conscious choice and it is important to identify the method by which they might do so. The method suggested by Guru Nanak is one of spiritual discipline, meditation & prayer, and sharing. Sikhism emphasizes mastering five negative forces: Lust, Anger, Worldly or Materialistic Attachment, Conceit and Greed. These together constitute what Sikhs term Haumai - "I am-ness." Mastering haumai is achieved by developing five positive forces: Compassion, Humility, Contemplation, Contentment and Service (seva) without expecting any

material or spiritual reward. The guiding principles are Love and Forgiveness. Every decision in life has to be based on Rationality and a personal code of ethics. Guru

Nanak's philosophy of values inspires the individual to transcend his/her existence through this spiritual discipline. Sikh religion preaches strong family involvement. A person pursuing this spiritual discipline must also work to create an atmosphere for other members of the family to progress spiritually.

THE IDEAL SIKH – ONE WITH THE INTENSE DESIRE TO DO GOOD

The third postulate is that the true end of the human beings is in their emergence as God-conscious beings, who remain aware of the earth and operate in the mundane material world, with the object of transforming and spiritualizing it into a higher plane of existence. In this spiritual state individuals are motivated by an intense desire to do good, transforming their surroundings.

Through a life based on the method prescribed by the Gurus humans may achieve a higher spiritual state. Such truly emancipated, valiant and enlightened spirits (jivan-mukta, brahma-gyani) become the true benefactors of humanity and the world around them. Such an individual would not exploit another human or sentient being, as each is a manifestation of the eternal and the supreme. In this God-conscious state they see God in all and everything.

*"I perceive Thy form in all life and light; I perceive Thy power in all spheres and sight."
(Guru Granth, page 464)*

Spiritualization is a liberation from material compulsions and attractions. It means an awareness of the Cosmic Order and striving towards the execution of Divine Will. So, the spiritualized human is creative and constructive. Therefore a Sikh life is a life of harmony with other individuals with other beings and other forms. For an enlightened individual the world has only one purpose - to practice spirituality. That is the ultimate objective of all humans.

Such a person is involved in human problems and society and has to prove his or her effectiveness there. Such a person lives with a mission - and works for the emancipation of all. A true Sikh is for individual human rights, the environment, and justice for all.

*"The God-conscious person is animated with an intense desire to do good in this world."
(Guru Granth Sahib, page 273)*