

The concept of one supreme reality in vedant and Sikhism

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Abstract

Sikhism, the youngest of the world religions, is a reflection of vedantic philosophy. The primary belief of Sikhism is one supreme God. Sikh spirituality is centered round the need to understand and experience God and eventually become one with God. This paper concludes with the fact that the concept of supreme reality in Sikhism is very close to that of vedantic philosophy.

Keywords: vedant, sikhism, brahma, *haumain*, *gian*

Introduction

Vedanta literally means 'end of the Vedas', that is, the final teaching or the essence of Vedas. It is the crowning consummation of the spiritual thoughts of India. Vedanta is more than a religion or a speculative philosophy. The conclusions of Vedanta are based on universal principles and are applicable to all people of all times. It is the teaching of Vedanta that has saved India again and again in times of spiritual crisis over the centuries. Breaking the barriers of traditions and conventions and cutting through the speculations of theology and philosophy, it leads the individual soul to its inevitable destiny - union with Brahman, the Supreme Soul. It pushes its search for truth as far as human reason can go and reaches the dizzy height where everything is reduced to one principle 'Pure Consciousness'. Though developed and perfected in the Indo-Gangetic plains, Vedanta cannot be called Indian, just as the law of gravitation, discovered by Newton, cannot be called a British law.

Sikhism, the youngest of the world religions, is barely five hundred years old. Its founder, Guru Nanak, was born in 1469. Guru Nanak spread a simple message of '*Ek Onkar*' 'we are all one', created by the One Creator of all Creation. This was at a time when India was being torn apart by castes, sectarianism, religious factions, and fanaticism. He aligned with no religion, and respected all religions. He expressed the reality that there is one God and many paths, and the Name of God is Truth, '*Sat Nam*'

Today, Sikhism is world's 5th largest religion. The Sikh scripture is the Guru Granth Sahib, a book that Sikhs consider a living Guru ^[1]. The most important thing in Sikhism is the internal religious state of the individual. Vedant is a storehouse of high spirituality and its echo can be heard in Sikhism.

Vedant

Brahma: The Reality of all Realities

Vedanta maintains that the Ultimate Reality is one and designates it by the name '*Brahman*'. Brahman is incorporeal, immutable, all-pervading, Absolute Pure Consciousness beyond all names, forms, and attributes. The various names, forms, and epithets of the Divine, such as Shiva, Kali, Vishnu, Jehovah, Allah, Father of Heaven, are merely

superimpositions of the individual seekers on Brahman. For the spiritual fulfillment of the seekers of truth, the Supreme Brahman assumes various names and forms. It is this Brahman that appears as Personal God and also as impersonal Absolute Truth. Brahman is called the Reality of all realities. The various concepts of the Divine are the various readings of the Absolute by individual minds from different depths and spiritual distances. They are like the various pictures of a building taken from various angles of vision. The individual soul, according to Vedanta, is the focus of the infinite Brahman. Designated by Vedanta as Atman, It is ever divine and ever pure. Atman is different from the ego-self, generally assumed to be the soul of a person. A human individual is a layered being. His soul remains encased by five material layers - physical body, vital air, mind, intellect, and bliss. The so-called individualities are like whirlpools in the Ocean of Infinite Brahman ^[2].

Creation

Creation, according to Vedanta, is beginningless cycles of manifestation and non-manifestation of Brahman, and it is often described by Vedanta texts as the out breathing and inbreathing of Brahman. The myriad diversity of the universe is only in name and form. As in the case of a mirage in a desert, the ignorant see water and trees but the enlightened see the desert; similarly, what appears as the diverse universe to the ignorant is perceived by the illumined as nothing but Brahman ^[3].

The message of Vedanta has two rhythms: "All this is verily Brahman" and "Thou art that" that is, God is both the Absolute and the relative Reality. One represents the dizzy height of mystical realization, the other its counterpart, its humanistic expression. One is Knowledge, the other intimate Knowledge ^[4].

Sikhism

The Concept of Ek Onkar

The starting point of the Sikh faith is, there is only one supreme God. This God is same for all the people of universe. The Sri Guru Granth Sahib, the Sikh Holy Scripture begins with the word: *ੴ* which basically means – There is only One God ^[5]. This is the primary message of Sikhism. It is often

said that the 1430 pages of the Sri Guru Granth Sahib are all expansions on this Mool Mantra. Although the Sikhs have many names for God, they all refer to the same Supreme Being.

Guru Nanak's concept and vision of the Supreme Being is embodied in these terms, which is called the Mool Mantra, literally meaning the Root Formula. Because of its importance as a basic theological declaration around which revolves the whole Sikh philosophical thought, it is most appropriately placed in the very beginning of the Sikh scripture. Almost all the Sikh scholars and theologians are unanimous in recognizing *Ek-Onkar* as the Bij Mantra. It is constituted of two components - *Ek* and *Onkar*. *Ek* means one, and is written as a numerical figure '1'. *Onkar* stands for the Primal mystical Divine Name of God referred to as *Brahma* in the Vedic literature [6].

The root of *Onkar* is traceable to the Hindu sacred syllable *Om*. With the evolution of Indian philosophic thought, the sages of Upanishads pronounced it as an adequate symbol of the Absolute Transcendent Reality, 'Brahma'. It is considered as the unity of all sound to which all matters and energy are reduced in their primordial form, hence fit as a symbol for *Atman* (soul) or *Brahma*, the Supreme Being, which is the unity of all existence. As a very sacred and powerful Mantra it forms part of daily worship and meditation by Hindu devotees. It is treated as the holiest symbol of Divinity calling it *Nada Brahma* or *Shabda Brahma* in the form of sound [7].

Guru Nanak's revealed Scripture place numerical figure '1' before *Onkar* thus enhancing his firm conviction in the unity of God. Its main importance and underlying significance lies in the fact that one is not represented by 'one' in words, but by the numerical figure '1', thus completely eliminating any possibility of words being given different meaning. It was Guru Nanak's own inspired vision that transformed OM into *Ek-Onkar* representing the Supreme Being, the Sole Absolute Eternal Reality which, while manifesting itself in multiplicity as *Onkar*, is still in its essence 'Sole and Absolute'; Transcendent as well as Immanent. Impersonal is also Personal in *Ek-Onkar* [8].

The negation of duality implies Absoluteness of God's being. Being Absolute, God cannot be comprehended by the mind. The mind is capable of knowing only those things, phenomena, facts and concepts which are bipolar or relative. God being Non-dual and Absolute, is Unknowable to man's mind. The word 'O-nkaar' denotes that God manifests Himself ceaselessly throughout His Creation in diverse forms, features and colours, and in this way becomes knowable to man. But, in spite of manifesting Himself diversely, God remains one. Immanent in all creation, while at the same time remaining transcendent. Thus God is at once one and many, implying Unity in Diversity. God being Non-Dual and absolute, is Unknowable to man's mind [9].

The quotations from Guru Granth Sahib indicates the absoluteness of God:

There is One God: from SGGS page 45:

paarbarahm parabh ayk hai doojaa naahee ko-ay.

There is only the One Supreme Lord God; there is no other.

jee-o pind sabh tis kaa jo tis bhaavai so ho-ay.

Soul and body are all yours; whatever pleases you, shall happen.

gur poorai pooraa bha-i-aa jap naanak sachaa so-ay..4-9-79.

Through the Perfect Guru, one becomes perfect; O Nanak, meditate on the True One [10].

The Creator

The Sikh holy scriptures refer to the One God who pervades the whole of Space and is the creator of all beings in the whole Universe. The following quotation from the SGGS highlights this point:

"Chant, and meditate on the One God, who permeates and pervades the many beings of the whole Universe. God created it, and God spreads through it everywhere. Everywhere I look, I see God. The Perfect Lord is perfectly pervading and permeating the water, the land and the sky; there is no place without Him." (SGGS 782)

"He formed the planets, solar systems and nether regions, and brought what was hidden to manifestation When He so willed, He created the world. Without any supporting power, He sustained the universe." (Page 1036)

Again Guru Granth Sahib Jee says,

"From the One Light the Creation came forth"

"So who is good and who is bad?"

(SGGS p1349)

We keep seeing differences in the branches of the tree calling some better than others, we forget that we came from the same seed and have the same sap of naam simran flowing in us [11].

Awwal Allah noor upaiya kudrat ke sabh bande

In the beginning Allah created the Light; His might has created all. The entire universe is created from that One Light: Who then is pure and who impure? Brother, fall not into the delusion made by man: The Creator is in the creation; in creation is He- He pervades the universe. From one clay, in various forms He has made all creation. Neither is any pot of clay faulty, nor the Potter. The Eternal abides in all. All happens as He wills. One who realizes the Divine Ordinance, and knows God to be One without a second - Such a one alone is His true servant. Allah and Alakh is incompassable- This inexpressible truth has the Master taught me. Says Kabir: On realizing this my doubts have vanished, and I have had sight of the all-pervading Immaculate Reality [12].

The same message can be heard in the Vedas when Atharvaveda says_ "I am not but am millions; myself I see in millions of beings. These million upon millions of eyes, ears, lives are but my eyes, my ears, my lives. I see myself at one with the countless lives of the earth_ they are me and I am they [13]. Again Yajurveda declares, "One who see all creatures as if they were his own selves and himself in others - his mind rest in peace with doubts to disturb it [14].

God inside Us

Sikhs believe that God is inside every person, no matter how wicked they appear, and so everyone is capable of change. Just as fragrance in the flower, and reflection is in the mirror, in just the same way, God is within every person. 15 When a Sikh wants to see God, they look both at the created world and into their own heart and soul. Their aim is to see the divine order that God has given to everything, and through it to understand the nature of God. Most human beings can't see

the true reality of God because they are blinded by their own self-centred pride (Sikhs call it *haumain*) and concern for physical things.

Sikhs believe in the evolution of the Soul and the principle of reincarnation. The soul is believed to be a tiny spark of God's light detached from the Almighty. This spark is separated from God and wants to become pure so that it can reunite with God. For this to happen, the Soul has to evolve and purify itself so that this reunification with the Supreme Soul can take place.

In Sikhism, the goal of human life is to break the cycle of birth's and deaths and merge with God. This can be accomplished by following the teachings of the Guru, meditation on the Holy Name and performance of acts of service and charity.

"I shall merge in the Lord like the water in the sea and the wave in the stream. The soul will merge in God and like air I shall look upon all alike. Then why shall I come again? The coming and going is under the Will of the Lord and Realising This Will, I shall merge in the Lord" (Bhagat Kabir, Maru)

"Meditation of the Lord is the highest of the deeds, through which myriads obtain release, through which the thirst (of desires) is quenched, through which one becomes all knowing, through which the fear of death goes away, through which all the desires are fulfilled, through which the dirt of the mind is cleansed and the Nectar of the Name of God is absorbed in the mind" (Guru Nanak, Gauri Sukhmani)

Appearance and Reality: The Sikh View

In Sikhism, the term '*Maya*' is used at many levels in the sense of appearance. The appearances as the manifest forms of the Real cannot be called illusions because nothing can be excluded from it. These appearances also cannot be independent of the Real because these will have to be put together with external relations ^[16].

Reality in Sikhism is a unity in which appearances as units are included in it. The Ik is one which manifests into the many. The Ik is a concrete unity which is neither an abstract one nor an abstract many. It is many in one and one in many. Hence, all appearances as real elements are inclusive in the non-dual Unity ^[17].

Sikhism considers the world real as manifestation of the Ik. Therefore, both *nirgun* and *sagun* are elements of one dynamic principle *hukam*. It possesses a problem of disunity owing to the apparent duality and multiplicity. It is a problem to transcendent egoity (*haumai*) and plurality (*maya*). Sikhism provides rigorous ethical discipline to reconcile the transcendence with the immanence.

From the ethical standpoint, the world is a reality because it is a base for self-realization.¹⁸ It seems that Guru Nanak has arrived at the idea of Maya through the intuitive experience of the real reflected in the transitory and evasive world. With his intuitive experience, he discovered (*bujhia*) that there is an eternal essence (*dhat*). Sher Singh also refers to this view when he says,

"Everything changes and the only thing that does not change is God in his Aphur state. As such the reality of the world is relative this manifestation as such changes and is transitory. This is Maya. The essence of it is the divine element which is permanently real. Maya does not mean that the world is an illusion ^[19].

Degrees of Reality and Appearances

In Sikhism, the phenomenal world is not absolutely real. It has degrees of reality. Hence, the manifest universe is relatively real. The manifest units are graded in higher and lower degrees of the real and the appearances ^[20]. The appearances as relatively real elements could be viewed as self-manifestation of the Ik, only if one's consciousness develops to a state of self-luminous divine consciousness. Guru Nanak says that man is imperfect but he becomes perfect only when he develops perfect wisdom (*puri mati*) which always praises the true greatness of the perfect one (pure). It is the perfect state of a realized person who sees that all appearances are self-manifestations of the Ik ^[21]. When the consciousness is perfected, there shall be no degrees of reality and appearances.

Avidya (Haumai)

The metaphysical structure of Sikhism is the systematic unity of the Ik in which the underlying spiritual unity is the essence of all manifestations. But owing to the veiling effect of Avidya, we fail to realize the underlying spiritual unity and the divine principle (*Hukum*). Sikhism emphasizes complete annihilation of individuality (*Haumai*) because realization of oneness with the Real is the central idea of Sikhism. It is just like absorbing a flame (*Joti*). In the same way, individual consciousness (*Surati*) gets absorbed (*Sanjogu*) into the cosmic consciousness ^[22].

It may pointed out that *Haumai* in the Guru Granth Sahib is used in a derogatory sense because it tends to mutilate the underlying spiritual unity and creates the multiplicity of individual finite selves ^[23].

The most significant contribution of the Sikh Gurus lies in highlighting the evil fact of *Haumai* which is to be annihilated so as to realize the non-dual unity. The self is to break open the ego-shell and to be one with the Real. It is to be realized through spiritual progression which emancipates the *Jiva* from the cocoon of separative sense of egoity. The Gurus preached a simple and fruitful path to the realization of Unity ^[24].

Gian

The Sanskrit word '*jnana*' in the Punjabi language is written as '*gian*' and it has also been used in the same form in the Guru Granth Sahib. The term '*gian*' in Sikhism stands for knowledge gained through perception, reason, and intuition. The highest form of metaphysical knowledge (*tat gian*) gained through intuition is distinct from the means because it is one with the Real. The higher knowledge is said to be the outcome of rigorous spiritual discipline of self –control (*sanjami*) and mental concentration (*dhian*) ^[25].

The metaphysical knowledge (*tat gian*) has no degrees. At the apex, the means of knowledge are themselves transformed into reality itself ^[26].

Conclusion

The basic theological concepts of Guru Granth Sahib reflects the Vedantic philosophy. The Sikh primary belief is in one Supreme God. Sikhs look for God both inside themselves and in the world around them. Sikh spirituality is centred round this need to understand and experience God, and eventually

become one with God. This non- dual structure of reality in Sikhism is very closer to the Advaita-Vedant.

Supreme is a bliss, is a vedantic concept, endorsed by both by the Brahmasutra and the Tejabindupanishad. Guru Nanak has sung the glory of 'Om' (G. 929-930) as the creator of the Veda, etc. Needless to say the 'Om' is the 'Vedic mantra as well as a pan Hindu symbol. Expressions like, 'uradh mula jasu sakha' (Guru Nanak, g. 503), '*Neta neta kathanti beda*' (Guru Arjuna, g. 1359), '*Brahamgiani sada niralepa jaise jalamahi kamal alepa*' (Guru Arjuna, g.272) are but echoes of the Vedas and the Bhagvadgita^[27].

The essence of Vedanta and Sikhism can be summed up in four sentences: God as Pure Spirit alone abides. The world of diversity is the manifestation of the Spirit in time and space. The individual soul and God as the Supreme Soul are non-different in essence. Realization of this identity alone can confer liberation and put an end to all the sorrows and sufferings of life.

In fact, different religions are only different pathways to the same common goal- God. It is to be discovered and realized by deepening our individual God-consciousness. Essentially there is only one religion, which is the religion of God-consciousness, one salvation, which is communion or union with God, and the way to salvation is one, that is, the way of purity and holiness.

From the very ealiest period Vedant has preached the harmony of religions. We find this Vedantic essence in the ancient words of the Rigveda, '*ekam sad vipra bahudha vadanti*' (Truth is one, sages call it by various names) as well in the realizations of the modern day saint, Sri Ramkrishna, "The substance is One under different names, and everyone is seeking the same substance; only climate, temperament, and name create differences. Let each one follow his own path. If he sincerely and ardently wishes to know God, peace be unto him. He will surely realize Him."

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