

WHO IS A SIKH ?  
THE PROBLEM OF SIKH IDENTITY

by W H McLeod, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1989, pages 140

A Review By Daljeet Singh

Few persons would write a book, *Who is a Christian ?* without a close study of the Bible, or *Who is a Muslim?* without reference to the Koran; but McLeod knows of no such inhibitions. And, though he concedes that the two questions 'What is Sikhism ?' and 'Who is a Sikh ?' are fundamentally the same, he proceeds to answer them without quoting the authority of hymns from Guru Granth, wherein both these issues have clearly been answered and defined. Except for the solitary phrase, '*Naam, Dan, Isnan*' (p. 1), he has not cited a single hymn from Guru Granth to support his views. This omission appears to be deliberate, because it is difficult to believe that McLeod is ignorant of the numerous hymns specifically dealing with the two questions. This suggests both the level and the motive of the publication. Even in explaining the meaning of '*Naam, Dan, Isnan*', McLeod has erred seriously. Considering the word *gurmukh* preceding the phrase and the entire context, '*Naam, Dan, Isnan*' conveys that with the Grace of God one is bestowed with the bounty of *Naam*, compassion, and purity. And *Naam* is not a name, a quality or a thing, it signifies the dynamic and immanent aspect of God that permeates and directs the entire cosmos. In the Gurus' system there is no greater gift one can get than being attuned to *Naam*. For, the gift of *Naam* includes the gift of every conceivable virtue, including compassion and purity. But in poetic phraseology, God is called Emperor, Father, Brother, Just, Protector, Shelter of the shelterless, etc. Except for the use of devotional diction, the words, *Dan* and *Isnan* and numerous other gifts enumerated in this long hymn, out of which McLeod has picked up this phrase, do not add anything to the attributes of *Naam* or God, which, the Guru describes as the 'Ocean of virtues'. Secondly, in this hymn of Guru Nanak, the word *Isnan* does not at all refer to any ritual 'bathing'. Separately, the Guru writes, "One who bathes himself in *Naam* becomes purified of the dirt of evil" and again, "Why go to bathe at the *Tirath*, for *Tirath* is *Naam*". Similarly, McLeod misinterprets the words *Naam Simran* by saying that these mean repetition of a 'word' or a 'name' (pp. 2, 17, and 22).

He does the same blunder as did Trumpp, with the possible difference that whereas Trumpp did it because of lack of understanding, McLeod seemingly does it knowingly because he is unlikely to be ignorant of the Guru's hymn deprecating all mechanical or ritualistic practices : "Every one repeats God's Name, but such repetition is not the way of God."

Every student of Guru Granth knows that Guru Nanak in the very first opening hymn of Guru Granth (*Japuji*) specifically puts the question, "How to be a True man (*sachiarā*) and dispel the wall of darkness ?" and then replies, "By carrying out the Will of God, God's Will being altruistic". Guru Nanak, thus, clearly answers the questions : "What is Sikhism ?", " How to be a Sikh ?" and "Who is a Sikh ?". Guru Granth is full of hymns after hymns endorsing these answers and emphasising that God being "All Love", His Will or *Naam* is dynamic and altruistic. It is in this background that Guru Nanak gave a call to every seeker, "If you want to play the game of love, then come on to my path with your head on your palm; once you set your foot on it, then waver not and be prepared to lay down your life." The path Guru Nanak suggests is the path of doing altruistic deeds. This certainly does not require any repetition of a *mantra* or a 'word', or being a pacifist. Similarly, Guru Arjun spoke to Bhai Manjh, "You may go on with the easy path of *Sakhi Sarwar* worship because the Sikh path is very difficult and unless you are willing to be dispossessed of your wealth, and to sacrifice your very life, it is no use coming to me." In fact, it is the same call for total surrender and sacrifice that Guru Gobind Singh gave on the Vaisakhi day, 1699 CE, while choosing *Panj Piare*, and creating the Khalsa. Ideologically, Guru Gobind Singh was no less a pacifist than Guru Nanak and the latter was no less dynamic than Guru Gobind Singh. McLeod's view that the ideology of Guru Nanak is different from that of Guru Gobind Singh or that there are on that account different kinds of Sikhs, only betrays his ignorance of Sikhism. Sikh doctrines are embodied and defined in Guru Granth. It is evidently misleading to derive the Sikh thesis from *Janam Sakhis* and not from Guru Granth. Actually, it is to avoid confusion about the Sikh doctrines that Guru Arjun took the sagacious step of compiling and authenticating Guru Granth. None of the Gurus did anything that was not sanctioned by it. McLeod is just making puerile distinctions. How can early Sikhism be called pacifist when it is Guru Nanak who calls God the "Destroyer of evil doers", rejects *ahimsa* (non-violence), and calls "truthful living higher than truth", and that one is measured by the "deeds one performs" ? It is not easy to believe that McLeod is so completely ignorant of the Sikh doctrines in Guru Granth.

This seriously affects the value of the book. Since McLeod's description of the very fundamentals of Sikhism lacks basis, the structure of *Who is a Sikh ?*, that he tries to build thereon is equally fallacious. The Imperial Order for the elimination of Sikhs directing the destruction of *Nanak-panthis*, does

not describe them as Khalsa, Sikhs, or Singhs, indicating that in the 18th century, there was only one community of *Nanak-panthis* whose sole founder was Guru Nanak. Unfortunately, McLeod's book lacks this perception and comprehension. Guru Granth is the authentic scripture of the Sikhs which Guru Arjun compiled and which Guru Gobind Singh appointed as the only I Guru of the Sikhs after him. There is clear historical evidence, which McLeod has perhaps knowingly omitted, both of Mohsin Fani and Sant Ramdas that Guru Hargobind emphasised that he was working in line with Guru Nanak's thesis of *Naam* and that his sword was to destroy the tyrant and protect the weak. Guru Gobind Singh also emphasised the unity of the thought of all Gurus, saying that they were all one in spirit. It is also incorrect (p. 46) that there was reconciliation of principles with ascetic Udasis. In fact, McLeod omits to record the early Sikh tradition in *Mahima Prakash*, and old Sikh writings that Baba Gurditta died after a hunting incident, and his son Guru Har Rai kept an army. What he quotes is Udasi tradition, not Sikh tradition.

In spite of McLeod's long labour in Sikh studies, his tendency to incorrectly represent Guru Nanak's doctrines, as exemplified in his consistent reluctance to cite the authority of Guru Granth, is clear enough. Guru Nanak's doctrine of carrying out the altruistic Will of God, who is deeply interested in the world, inevitably leads to his system of an inalienable combination of the spiritual life and the empirical life of man and the consequent *miri-piri* doctrine. Guru Hargobind only symbolised it by the two swords he donned, but institutionalised it by raising the Akal Takht adjacent to Harmandir Sahib. The first five Gurus motivated the Sikh society in the new ideals, weaning them away from the earlier Indian religions, and the later five Gurus continued to train it in those ideals, till the tenth Master did the epitomic work of choosing the five *Piars* (*sant-sipahis* or *whalemen*), creating the Khalsa to shoulder the responsibilities of the mission for pursuing and defending righteousness, and closing the line of succession by appointing the divine Word in Guru Granth as the future Guru. McLeod's view that the first five Gurus preached the *Naam Simran* ideal of interiority, and later Gurus what he calls the "heroic ideal" (p. 47), is a complete distortion of Sikhism. For, it is Guru Nanak, who made a diametric departure from the earlier religions by :

- a) calling life real as against its being regarded as *mithya*, *maya*, or a suffering;
- b) rejecting monasticism, asceticism and withdrawal from life, and recommending full life participation and total social responsibility;
- c) rejecting the religious doctrines of *Varn Ashram Dharma* and related ideas of a caste, pollution, etc., and instead recommending equality of man in all spheres of life;
- d) rejecting ideas of celibacy and downgrading woman and instead accepting equality of man and woman, and a householder's life;

- e) rejecting the inviolability of the doctrine of *ahimsa* and removing thereby the hurdle of *ahimsa* while pursuing righteous causes; and
- f) breaking the dichotomy between the spiritual life and the empirical life of man existing in earlier religions, and instead combining the two, thereby rejecting life negation and accepting life-affirmation.

It is this thesis of Guru Nanak that was laid down in Guru Granth and was followed and lived by the succeeding Gurus. McLeod's division of the Sikh ideals embodied in Guru Granth and then suggesting consequent multiple Sikh identities, shows lack of authenticity of his work, if it is not an attempt to misrepresent Sikhism.

Another unfortunate feature of the book is that McLeod not only fails to support his view by hymns from Guru Granth, but also artfully omits considerable historical and scriptural evidences that contradict his views. For example, it is a historical fact that at the time the sixth Guru donned the two swords, and earlier also at the time of the fifth Guru, *Jats* were a minority among the Sikhs, and both Baba Budha, a *Jat*, and Bhai Gurdas indicated their opposition to the Guru's policy of militancy. McLeod also omits to mention Guru Hargobind's statements to Mohsin Fani and Sant Ramdas that he was pursuing Guru Nanak's thesis. Hence McLeod's thesis that militant tradition was present in the *Panth* on account of *Jats* (p. 25) has no basis. For, Guru Hargobind even recruited mercenaries because volunteers or recruits from the *Panth* were not available originally. While there is no evidence to suggest that *Jats* kept a *kirpan* and unshorn hair (p. 40) and others did not, he also omits to mention that both Guru Nanak and Guru Arjun have described God as having handsome hair. In addition, he fails to mention contemporary Sainapat's clear statement that it is the condition of keeping hair laid down by the Guru that led to some dissent among Sikhs of Delhi.

The Gurus have described the final stage of spiritual achievement by different words like *Sahaj*, *Nirban*, *Mukti*, etc., but by these words they only mean being attuned to dynamic *Naam* or God's Will. McLeod's suggestion that the *Sahaj* ideal is only for *sahajdharis*, and not the Khalsa is wholly fallacious. In fact, the word *sahajdhari* appears only after 1699, when some Sikhs found themselves not strong and ready enough to accept the *amrit*. Neither ideologically, nor historically, McLeod has been able to provide any basis for his classification. Every Khalsa is a Sikh but every Sikh is not a Khalsa; for, Guru Gobind Singh entrusted all social responsibility to the Khalsa and not to the Sikhs who on their own admission were unprepared to accept *amrit* and its responsibilities. Ideologically speaking, to call a person a Sikh who does not believe in the ten Gurus and Guru Granth is a contradiction in terms. Only a charlatan can profess that he has belief both in Guru Granth and Hindu scriptures; for, a Sikh-Hindu is as much an absurdity as a Sikh-Muslim or a Sikh-Christian.

McLeod, while saying that the prohibition against smoking and eating *halal* suggests Guru Gobind Singh's anti-Muslim bias, conceals the fact that whereas Hindu Hill Princes were hostile to him and even invited the Imperial forces to make a joint attack against the Guru, it was a Muslim *Pir*, Budhu Shah, who sent his sons and followers to join the Guru's forces against the Hill Princes. Two of the *Pirs* sons died while fighting for the Guru, showing instead of prejudice, the immense respect the Guru commanded among pious Muslims. Many of McLeod's statements like those concerning *Sacha Patshah* and *Prem Sumarag* (p. 68) are equally untenable. For, *Prem Sumarag* on the basis of available manuscripts, internal and historical evidence, and language, has been dated a production of the first quarter of the eighteenth century by Mohan Singh, S S Kohli, J S Grewal, and Randhir Singh, but McLeod without examining any manuscripts places it in mid-nineteenth century simply because its contents controvert McLeod's conjectural view. Use of such tactics is quite unacademic. Another fault of the book is that the author relates facts and perceptions of the nineteenth century, when many fair-weather friends had entered during Sikh rule the Sikh circles, to the earlier centuries of strict definition, rigorous test and trials, and when laxity of faith or pretended loyalties could not last unexposed.

It is, indeed, unfortunate and sad that a scholar who produced the laborious work on *Janam Sakhis* has, in this volume, by his disregard for ideological and historical accuracy, selective use of material, and unbalanced approach, come quite near the level of partisan writing.

*Greetings to the Guru-God,  
Who, the Formless One,  
Is in the beginning, the middle and the end,  
He Himself is in primordial trance,  
Himself He in the seat of peace. He Himself  
hears, Himself singing His own praise,  
He Himself created Himself;  
He is His own Father and Mother.  
He Himself is the subtle,  
He Himself the apparent,  
Nanak : no one can know of this, His Play. (1)*

*Guru Granth Sahib, p. 250*