

Transforming Spiritual Landscapes: Guru Nanak and Martin Luther as Contemporaries

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Abstract

As mankind enters unprecedented domains in the field of technological and materialistic advancement, the moral and spiritual compass of human life needs firm anchors. Today, more than ever, the teachings of Guru Nanak can guide and help mankind navigate crisis of faith. The present paper examines the teachings and basic philosophical tenets of two figures, Guru Nanak and Martin Luther, who lived at the same time in history and founded two ways of life, Sikhism and Protestantism. The paper studies some thought processes which are common to both. There are vast grounds of differences also in the teachings of both Guru Nanak and Martin Luther, but both stressed on the human being as essence of the divine.

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The study of history throws up facts and figures at different times, but at some point it seems parallel events in human history are told or recorded in very different terms. At a time when, Christopher Columbus, Vasco da Gama, Magellan were negotiating the seas, Martin Luther was troubling the Roman Catholic Church, Copernicus propounded heliocentrism, Shakespeare was around the corner, a figure like Guru Nanak was on his own mission across half the globe spreading the message of universal humanity. He travelled on foot, across half of the globe on journeys called *udasis* to cherish humanity and brotherhood.

The lives of all the figures mentioned above are more or less vividly documented but the lack of verifiable data of Guru Nanak's life is befuddling and poses unique problems. His insistence on putting on paper various hymns and yet not recording any biographical details, with a few exceptions, is puzzling. However, it can be said that both Guru Nanak and Martin Luther challenged the existing religious order of their times. They observed, wrote and changed many ideas, notions and beliefs. Many parallels can be ascertained in their lives and teachings, but with reservations. It has been recently propounded that Guru Nanak did actually meet both Martin Luther and Pope Leo X around the 1520s. He met the Pope in Rome in 1520 at a Clave, a religious meeting of Cardinals. Documentary evidence of this meeting is said to be preserved in the Vatican's records. The possibility of an actual meeting of Guru Nanak and Martin Luther is open to conjecture and evidence but it can be said that their thought processes did have common meeting grounds.

The timeline of history of the Asian sub-continent and even the world, bears witness to the birth of the true Renaissance man, Guru Nanak, in Punjab. While Europe had its Renaissance, Guru Nanak brought about his own version of the Renaissance in Punjab's spiritual life. Guru Nanak was a wandering poet, minstrel, sage, guru, singer, son, husband father and brother. He tilled the fields, sowed seeds and harvested crops in the City of Kartarpur, the Creator. Thus, His message was clear. God had to be found with engagement in the affairs of this earth, not by becoming a recluse or by renunciation of the matters of the world. He conveyed deep metaphysical truths using simple truths of everyday life. Many of these incidents have been recorded in the traditional *Janamsakhis* which construct concrete scenes and place Guru Nanak Dev Ji in a geographical, cultural, multi-religious landscape. Scholars, academicians and historians like Max Arthur Macauliffe have shed light on the religion of Sikhism and the ten Gurus, but this is an evolving and dynamic faith which has constantly re-invented itself.

A contemporary of Guru Nanak, Martin Luther, born in 1483 in Germany, shook the foundations of Roman Catholicism and set in motion the Reformation within the Church. Nature played a key role in the lives of both Guru Nanak and Martin Luther. Luther was caught in a severe storm once in childhood and prayed that he be saved and that he would become a monk if the Divine paid heed to his prayers. It is said that Guru Nanak attained enlightenments after taking a dip in the river Bein in which he remained for three days. A massive search was launched and he was almost given up for dead. But when he emerged after three days, a sense of calm and knowing is said to have prevailed upon him. Guru Nanak then declared that there is no Hindu and no Musalman and that all are indeed one.

Martin Luther became disillusioned with Rome when at the age of 27, he went to Rome for a Catholic Church Conference. He was appalled by the corruption (moral and material) of the clergy. He said that, 'Man, however, needs none of these things for his righteousness and salvation. Therefore he should be guided in all his works by this thought and contemplate this one thing alone, that he may serve and benefit others in all that he does, considering nothing except the need and the advantage of his neighbor.' This singular assertion strongly resonates the later moving away from iconography practiced by both Martin Luther and Guru Nanak. The initial incident which prompted a strong response from Guru Nanak was the *Janeu* ritual, the bestowing of the sacred thread of the Brahmin way of life. The child Nanak refused to wear the thread saying that it was a discriminatory practice which was more ritualistic than enlightening. The conversation which Guru Nanak had on this occasion with Pandit Hardayal led to his name spreading far and wide as the child who dared question the authority of the scriptures and established religion. Though Martin Luther never questions the authority of the Bible, he does have reservations over the confined interpretation of scripture by the Church and its priesthood. The exploitation of the common populace by the priestly classes bothered both Guru Nanak and Martin Luther significantly. Martin Luther went as far as saying that all Christians could be considered priests and could interpret the Bible individually on a personal level. However, language proved to be the biggest barrier in this, as the Bible remained inaccessible to the general public.

Martin Luther, then enrolled in the University of Wittenberg and earned a Doctorate in Theology. It is here that his love for Scripture finds its true calling. He goes on to translate the Bible's New Testament into German much to the chagrin of the Holy Roman Empire and

antagonizes them further. He used a standard and accessible German dialect for the translated version, which along with the rise of the middle class, trade and printing press put the Bible into the hands of all. Luther's translation influenced the English translation of the Bible and opened it to the common man who had no knowledge of Latin, Hebrew or the Semitic languages. The written word thus was a valuable asset to Martin Luther in his mission of de-mystifying Christianity. He says, 'I acknowledge no fixed rules for the interpretation of the Word of God, since the Word of God, which teaches freedom in all other matters, must not be bound' (Grimm). Guru Nanak carried a book, a *pothi*, with him everywhere and it is believed that he was in the habit of writing down divine words and thoughts. This notebook also contained hymns, verses from Hindu and Muslim bhagats and bhatts (devotees and bards) and was handed down to his successors. In the future, these notings and compositions would take the form of the Sri Guru Granth Sahib. Guru Nanak, thus gave us Gurmukhi, the language of the Guru. Punjabi, his mother tongue, Hindi and Persian and some five other dialects can be found in the Sri Guru Granth Sahib. Thus, somewhere Guru Nanak also realized that the divine revelations need to be in a language or script easily understandable by the masses.

Both Sikhism and Christianity stress the importance of the 'word' as divine. The most significant composition of Guru Nanak has been the *Mul Mantar* and the *Japji Sahib*. The *Mul Mantar* is indeed the heart and essence of Sri Guru Granth Sahib and of the Master himself. It is deeply ingrained in the subconscious of every Sikh right from childhood and offers unconditional solace in times of crisis. Any understanding of Sikhism must originate from here and then extend to the moral and spiritual compass of the world. The message that God is one and that He is above everything holds special relevance today. He can dispel darkness with these words and '*Shabad*' is the supreme Guru. The *Japji Sahib* describes the concepts of time and space in relation to attaining the 'Formless and Attributeless Lord' who pervades all divisions of time (Kohli 170).

The visionary that he was, Guru Nanak realised what would happen when His physical form would pass on and that is why He strongly institutionalised the Seat. Guru Nanak was as much a social reformer as a religious leader. He recognized the urgent need for social and spiritual reform in society like his contemporary Martin Luther, who at the same time was challenging religious functioning in Germany and Europe. Much can be gauged by the way in which both Guru Nanak and Martin Luther have been treated by history. Both believed that

renunciation and asceticism could not provide the answers they had been looking for. Religion (spirituality) and the life of a householder could co-exist. Sikhism stresses on the active way of life with involvement in worldly life. The institutions of marriage and family were validated by both through disciplined worldliness. Guru Nanak married early in life and later settled in Kartarpur where he lived the life of a farmer. Martin Luther married a former nun in 1525 and enjoyed domestic life while performing his holy duties.

Ritualism as a pillar of religion was strongly derided by both Guru Nanak and Martin Luther. Luther's main point of resistance was the sale of 'Indulgences', works or donations which Popes handed out as cancelling out of sins or as means of saving souls from Purgatory. It was common practice to buy indulgences in the name of one's ancestors in the hope of saving their souls from hell. Martin Luther wrote a document called the 95 Theses in which he summed up the current concept of Christianity. He nailed this document to the University of Wittenberg's Chapel door on October 31, 1517, a day which is now marked as the Reformation Day. The spread of 95 Theses to Europe was further aided by the progress in the printing press which saw mechanization during this period. Guru Nanak's chastisement of Duni Chand also had as its cause the so-called appeasement of souls of dead forefathers. He told Duni Chand that his feeding of hundred Brahmins was nothing more than a meaningless ritual which would have no effect whatsoever on his dead father's soul. In another incident, while at Haridwar, Guru Nanak derided the custom of offering water to souls of ancestors in the river Ganga by seeming to water his crops back in Punjab. These incidents are now part of the Sikh psyche through telling and re-telling over generations.

Sikhism and Protestantism have evolved in very different ways over time. The Protestant movement was not very tolerant initially with charges of anti-semiticism being leveled against it. Guru Nanak did not believe in the concept of the trinity and asserts that God is formless, fearless and foeless and 'a Sikh is a devotee and disciple of God, a student who is always eager and passionate to learn how to grow into his full potential as a true and conscious human being' (Kapur 155). In a very telling description of the relationship of the Lord/husband and the devotee/bride, Guru Nanak refers to the devotee as *Kuchajee* – the ungraceful bride, *Suchajee* – the noble and graceful bride and *Gunvantee* – the worthy and virtuous bride. He says that the devotee as ungraceful bride complains of the lack of attention from the master while the worthy bride is bestowed with divine bliss and love (SGGS 762-63). Martin Luther also explains the

relationship of the faithful and Christ as a true marriage in which ‘if Christ is a bridegroom, he must take upon himself the things which are his bride’s and bestow upon her the things that are his (Grimm).

Guru Nanak’s life is unparalleled and displayed exemplary dedication to community development. His concepts of *langar*, *sangat*, *pangat* and *sewa* need to be invoked constantly for the service of humanity, especially in face of the turbulent times of today. These four concepts can break down all hierarchies and differences of race, caste, colour, sect, religion and gender. Guru Nanak questioned the existence, significance and relevance of all that He saw around him. His strong sense of observation coupled with his sense of defiance of existing norms of society is something we must learn in today's problematic times. His institutions are a case in point, as He meant for them to survive the test of time.

References

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