

POINTS OF CONTACT FOR CHRISTIANS

When talking to a Sikh about your Christian faith you will probably find that he agrees with you about many things. Much Sikh teaching is similar to that," Christianity.

GENUINE SEARCH FOR GOD

Expressions of devotion and love for God are found throughout the Granth. Often Christians can utter the same words. We can admire the dedication and conviction of- countless Sikh martyrs who were to make the supreme sacrifice for their faith. Of course, there are Sikh hypocrites and heretics but the same can be said for Christians.

CONCEPT OF GOD

For Christians and Sikhs the world is no accident. The Bible opens with the statement,

In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth'

The Granth says,

'He was in the beginning: He was in the primal age. The true one is, was, O Nanak, and shall ever be.'

Both religions teach that God is sovereign over history and that the present order will eventually give way to a new one.

They share the belief that God did not set the world in motion and then stand back front it. He is a constantly active God. Nor is He an abstract idea or just a moral force. He is also personal, capable of being loved and honored and yet everywhere in creation. He may be

addressed in such personal terms as Father, Lover, Master. Christians and Sikhs find their reason for living in their relationship with God, whose will they seek to do in their daily lives.

THE WORD OF GOD

Both religions place great emphasis on Scripture and encourage their followers to read it daily. Christians regard the Bible as the eternal, God-inspired Word. For Sikhs the Granth is not just a 17th century document but' the eternal word of God.

For Christians the `Word' means more than just an utterance. It possesses power. The prophets often speak of the Word, given to them by God, which they must speak out. `The word of the Lord came to me' (Ezekiel 12:1). The Word is also the instrument of the creator,

`Before the world was created, the Word already existed; he was with God and he was the same as God. From the very beginning the Word was with God.

Through him God made all things; not one thing in all creation was made without him.' (John 1:1-3)

The Sikh term for the `Word' is Shabad. It is said to be present in everything, but beyond human discerning: Sikhs believe that the Gurus were inspired by the Word and that their primary function was to tell it to others.

GOD'S PLAN OF SALVATION

Both Christians and Sikhs believe that God sent his divinely inspired messengers into the world and-that an era of history began with their ministries. Sikhs say that Guru Nanak's birth was divinely ordained. Christians

believe that Mary conceived Jesus through the power of the Holy Spirit.

Guru Nanak was conscious of being called and ordained to bring people a revelation of God's truth. He had a sense of mediation, of bridging the gap between God and men by showing them the way to achieve salvation. He taught that it was achieved through meditation. Jesus was also conscious of being called by God to reveal his truth to mankind. But unlike Guru Nanak he declared that he Himself was the way (John 3:16). He gave his life on the cross to bridge the gap between men and God.

Sikhs believe that the Gurus were inspired by God but deny that God ever assumed human form. 'God has no form or features.' (Ad Granth p. 750) They are suspicious of any teaching about a God who was born and died as in the stories of the Hindu gods. They are also suspicious of the Christian teaching that Jesus was God incarnate.

THE GRACE OF GOD

The word grace appears many times in both the Christian and Sikh scriptures. In both it refers to the undeserved gift of God. 'For it is by God's grace that you have been saved through faith. It is not the result of your own efforts, but God's gift... (Ephesians 2: 8-9). Guru Arjan 'All the works we do to expiate for our sins save us not but the name of the Lord

washes off myriads of sins.' Both readings affirm that salvation cannot be gained by good works and insist on the need for a changed life.

But we must treat the word grace carefully. Despite the references in the Granth, which appear to mean that man

cannot do anything to save himself, Sikhs do not view grace as the exclusive means by which they may obtain salvation. Some view it as merely God's reward in response to, human efforts such as meditation and acts of love and charity.

For Christians grace is the only way through which they may receive salvation. Jesus gave his life for us on the cross without our doing anything to deserve it. 'It was while we were still sinners that Christ died for us' (Romans 5:8): His death met the requirement of God's justice: As a result he can offer us pardon and forgiveness. All we have to do is respond in faith.

ANTI-RITUALISM

The Gurus taught that spiritual merit could not be achieved through carrying out rituals. They rejected other, practices used by Hindus and Muslims including self-mutilation, excessive generosity, fasting, meditation when not focused on the Lord, pilgrimages, painting one's face, the sacred thread worn by Hindus, dying a heroic death in battle, and worshipping sticks and stones.

Ritualism has crept back into Sikhism in various forms but nevertheless the Sikh teaching against it parallels the Christian doctrine, mentioned above, that salvation cannot be achieved through works. A witnessing Christian can remind Sikhs who are caught up in good works that the Granth teaches the impossibility of being saved by them. This may open the door to explaining that salvation can only be found in Jesus.

GOD'S PRESENCE

Both Sikhs and Christians believe that God may be experienced in private

prayer and public worship. His presence is necessary for true worship and fellowship.

FELLOWSHIP

For Christians the true church is not a building but the community of believers, the body of Christ. Similarly the entire Sikh community is known as the Panth. Both Christians and Sikhs value fellowship with other believers and regard it as an essential element in the practice of their faith. . The New Testament tells us how the early church was made up of groups of believers rather than individuals. The apostle Paul established churches wherever he went. In the 20th century Christians still receive strength and a sense of security from their membership of a local body of believers: Worship with others, is an essential part of their faith. In Holy Communion they share as a family in receiving the bread and wine, the symbols of Christ's sacrifice on their behalf.

Sikhs lay similar stress on being part of a local fellowship. They reject the idea that any Sikh should detach himself from the congregation to pursue salvation on his own. The sharing of kara prasad (p. 8?) and the langar (p. 37) are an essential part of Sikh practice. There is not even any special priestly class in Sikhism. The feeling of warmth and oneness Sikhs experience while joining in community worship and the langar can be compared to the experience of Christians who worship and share together.

SUFFERING AND EVIL

'Both Sikhism and Christianity regard suffering in earthly life as only part of the story. They give no rational or

theological answer to the question, 'Why do people suffer?' But both encourage their followers to hang on to the conviction that God does know what is going on, and to remain faithful to him. For Sikhs the issue is clear-cut: Guru Nanak taught that suffering is a part of life as real as joy but not as welcome. It can only, be endured by obeying the will of God.

But the New Testament offers us something more hopeful than 'grin and bear it'. It sees the suffering of Jesus as a central part of God's plan. The devil is active in the world, causing trouble and pain for his own ends. But Jesus rose from the dead, demonstrating the power of love to overcome evil, sin and death. The Christian can resist the devil in the victory of Jesus, and his hope for the future is secure in this too.

SERVICE TO OTHERS

Both Christians and Sikhs believe that God is the parent of all human beings. They should work as his co-partners in the world caring for all people as if they were part of their own family.

Christians know the commandment in Leviticus to 'Love your neighbor as you love yourself' (Leviticus 19:18) and its illustration in the parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25-37). The Sikh doctrine of sewa (p. 73) teaches that service to others is the greatest of all human virtues. Wherever a Sikh community is found sewa should be one of its characteristics.

Both Christians and Sikhs are taught that they should seek enough for their daily needs and give

away what is surplus rather than selfishly expecting a superabundance for themselves. For both, prayer should focus on seeking God's will in their daily life rather than going their own way. ,

THE TRUE GURU

There are various references in the Granth to the Sat Guru (True Guru) but some uncertainty as to whom they refer. For example, 'For the Word is the True Guru and the True Guru is the Word; and through the Word one knows the Path of Emancipation' (GS 1248). Guru Amar Das wrote, 'He who believes in the True Guru, he is saved both here and hereafter' (GS 105).

Some Christians from a Sikh background feel that the phrase the True Guru refers to God himself and that we can point to Jesus as its fulfillment. There are many parallels between the qualities ascribed to the True Guru in the Granth and those ascribed to Jesus Christ in the Bible. However there are also differences and we should not skate over these in order to make Christian-teaching more acceptable to Sikhs. If we do they may feel that Sikhism has everything and they do not need Jesus.

The Granth teaches that the True Guru:

- Has a divine nature
- Is creator of the world
- Is called by God
- reveals the truth about God through his Word
- is the giver of peace
- is the only hope of purification from sin
- is the breath of life

The Bible tells us similar things about Jesus. He:-

- has a divine nature
- is the creator of the world
- was sent into the world by God to save men and women from their sins (John 3:16)
- is the truth and provides the way to God (John 14:6).
- is the one through whom salvation can be received (Acts 4:12).
- reveals God to men
- gives us spiritual life

However many Sikhs are not aware of the references in the Granth to the True Guru. *So this is not the place* to start in sharing about Jesus with Sikhs unless they are scholars or teachers already familiar with the references: Despite all the common ground between Sikhs and Christians, Sikhism is powerless to save men and women. When talking with a Sikh friend you can share what you have in common but realize that emphasizing this unduly may strengthen his resolve to maintain his faith because Christianity seems so close to his present beliefs. Significant differences may have greater potential for drawing him to Christ. They may not make Christianity more appealing at the outset but the need to make a choice will be clearer. We shall deal with these differences in the next chapter (after which there is a double dose of 'things to do').

(Reference: Lions, Princesses and Gurus-Chapter 14, Ram Gidoomal & Margaret Wardell.)