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Grace in Sikhism

By

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As in all other religions there are two contrary streaming in Sikhism too. One teaches that meaning and value of human existence depends on the human works which we call the operative model. The other streaming preaches that the Holy's grace is the substance of men's ultimate destination, and it alone gives meaning to their existence; this position we call the receptive model. As the third streaming we can identify the doctrine of conditioned gratification which means that the humans get Divine support for achieving the salvation of their souls. This third one is obviously the predominant model in all religions.

The religious books of the Sikhs have incorporated all positions. Therefore they are widespread and popular. Everybody finds what suits to him.

We will reconstruct the receptive model as it is shown in Nitnem, where the daily prayers of the Sikhs are collected.¹

JAPUJI

The Morning Prayer

IV

*The Lord is holy; holy is His Name;
Infinite are the expressions of devotion to Him.
All creation seeks boons of Him;
Endlessly does He confer these.*

¹ NITNEM. Daily Prayer Texts of the Sikhs. Rendered into English by Gurbachan Singh Talib. New Delhi: Guru Nanak Foundation 1983.

*What to offer Him in return?
 How to get a glimpse of His court?
 What words to utter to win His pleasure?
 By man's actions is acquired the vesture of human incarnation;
 By God's grace is attained the Door of Liberation.
 Nanak! Know the All-holy to be Almighty, Absolute.*

By their very nature the human beings know that they - in view of their salvation - completely depend on the boons of the Name or Power of the Holy. At the same time they can be aware that the Holy not only has that power or name, but also that He is always ready to give His human creatures what they need for a true existence. Stressing this basic existential fact that the human beings do not at all exist out of their own merits and works the poem says the human creatures have nothing they could give back for the graciously conferred boons, and that not even the most meek and pious prayer could make the Holy inclined to the human devotees. By one's own works - the most pious ones either – no one is able to get even the slightest experience of pleasing in the sight of God.

The poem summarizes the radical negation of any human contribution to the meaning giving of human existence by telling the pious people the monopoly in this concern quite straight: Human actions including highest pious and moral activities do not merit the Holy's benevolence; just the opposite is true: they merit only the horrible fate of re-incarnation! The human beings have got existential liberation of that horrible fate only by the non-merited grace of God.

In this way the Holy demonstrates its omnipotence; its omnipotence over the horrible fantasy that the Divine Law, which repays the human beings for their actions, would be the omnipotent ruler of existence even God had to follow.

Nanak has to realise – and that is his original message – that the Holy is the almighty Lord over his creature: the Divine Law. That Law is in charge only to regulate the external existence but not to make any last judgement on that creation of the Holy.²

Therefore, the sense and meaning of human existence is out of the competence of human activity; it is the Holy's monopoly. That radical message excludes also that the human act of 'accepting' the non-merited grace would be a necessary condition to get the grace. That would twist the message to mean just the opposite – a strategy by which the Divine Law misusing fanatics through the back door try to make once more the god-created Divine Law the ruler of existence and God its powerless hangman or waiter. The following verses are reaffirming the position unambiguously:

RAHIRAS

Suni wadda akhai sabh koi

*Fruitless is all practice of virtue, austerity, good deeds,
 And high attainments of great yogis.
 Without Thy grace none has realization achieved:
 This by grace comes; else all efforts remain unfruitful.
 None of his own effort gains devotion to Thee.³*

² The operative model we find op.cit., p.37 (Finale to Japuji): *Approval or rejection by God come from each one's actions.* The moral position is supported op.cit., p. 79 (Suddha Swayyei) : *Only those practising loving devotion shall attain the Lord.* Even the Calvinist doctrine of the double predestination to election or damnation is taught op.cit., p.98 (Rahiras): *All creation is play of Thy play. Those condemned to alienation, away from Thee are cast. Such are destined to union, to Thee are united.* This predestination is visible by actions op.cit.: *Realization of Thee comes to such as by Thee are enlightened. Such the Lord's praise are ever expressing.*

³ Op.cit., p. 90

All these *high attainments* produce the horrible illusion of transmigration and in this way deny the omnipotence of God's grace. The poem attacks the pious arrogance as unfruitful and tells the pious people that any of their pious works can make them devote to that gracious God. The reason is clear:

JAPUJI
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*He The Supreme Giver grants without the least expectations of return.
Liberation from the bondage of transmigration comes by His grace.*

There can be no doubt: The gracious Holy rejects any merit of good deeds, orthodox ideas, and pious feelings. Otherwise He would hand over the human beings to the bondage of transmigration. That however is against the Holy's inherent nature. And the poem does not accept in this concern any further dispute about God's unconditioned grace and the merit-free human existence:

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Beyond this nothing may be said.