
W.H.MCLEOD AND HIS PERCEPTION ABOUT GURU NANAK DEV

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Abstract

W.H. Mcleod is a leading Western Scholar of Sikhism and Sikh community. His ideas and insights and his western historical method has proved to be a beacon light for the students, researchers and scholars of the Sikh studies. By the sheer dint of his academic pursuits, linguistic skills and in depth analysis of Sikh history, doctrine and literature, he has earned the reputation of a critical historian of international stature. Mcleod played a major role in the establishing and popularizing the academic study of Sikhism outside India. He leaves behind a body of work on Sikhism which will be a source of reference to the coming generations of Sikh scholars.

Key words: Sikhism, Sikh community, Religion,

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Mcleod wrote several books¹ including 'Guru Nanak and Sikh Religion', 'The Evolution of Sikh Community', 'The Sikh History, Religion and Society', many others. As a scholar his life's work helped transform the understanding of Sikhism. He produced a remarkable series of publications and was central in establishing Sikh studies as a distinctive field. And this is remarkable that go to any major library and you will find shelved Dr. Mcleod's books on Sikhs and Sikhism. Although his own work was careful, measured and judicious, it frequently provoked controversy and for the purpose of better understanding and assessment of Mcleod's perception of the Sikhs and their religion, it is imperative to give a brief intellectual trajectory of an eminent historian.

Hew Mcleod was born on 2 August, 1932 A.D. in fielding, a town in the North Island of New Zealand, near which his father had a sheep farm. He attended secondary school at Nelson college in the South Island town of Nelson. While at school, he decided to abandon his intention to be a farmer, and instead chose to be a teacher at school. He went from school to the University of Otago as an undergraduate and did a B.A. and an M.A. in History.² He also met Margaret Wylie there, and in May 1955, they got married.³ He was trained at University college (1963-65 A.D.) and at the university of London. During his studies, he was greatly attracted by the student Christian Movement (SCM).⁴ It was also nicknamed student contemplating Matrimony. In the 1950s, student Christian Movement was a

flourishing organization.⁵ Hew was a member.⁶ This movement not only provided him an opportunity to have continuous contact with the Church but also any religious doubts or queries.⁷ Hew came from 'traditional' i.e. ordinary pious family. His study of Christianity at the college was (psychologically) more problematic than curricular.⁸ Hew had a emotionally experienced the problem : tradition and facts are different. That's his outlook of Sikh History.⁹ After M.A. in 1954 A.D., he joined Presbyterian Theological Hall, Dunedin in 1955A.D. and obtained his theological License and was registered as a Presbyterian church Reverend in December 1957A.D. Same year he was ordained to work as an overseas missionary and appointed to replace Dr. Ryburn at Bible Class Movement, a British colonialism/Imperialism vestige of Christian proselytism in Kharar, Punjab, India Rev. Mcleod arrived in Kharar Punjab, India in mid 1958A.D. and at the end of his five-year Christian missionary work in 1963A.D. he was eligible for a sabbatical that he could avail for further studies. He decided to pursue study of Sikhism instead of Christianity & wrote to A.L. Basham whose Books 'The wonder that was India, 'he had read, and who was now a professor at the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS), University of London. Prof. Basham replied he would be happy to have him as a Sikh studies doctoral student.¹⁰ He did Ph.D. in London under his guidance and the focus of his doctoral thesis was on '*The Life and Doctrine of Guru Nanak*', a work which was published by Clarendon Press in 1968A.D. at Oxford in the revised form under the new title of '*Guru Nanak and the Sikh Religion*'.¹¹

Having received his Ph.D. degree in 1965A.D., Hew Mcleod returned to India for four years as Lecturer in Punjab History at Basing Union Christian College, Batala (1965-69A.D.). Then he returned to New Zealand and joined of History Department at University of Otago, Dunedin, where he retired as a Professor of History in 1997A.D. He acquired a D.Lit. degree from the University of London in 1990 A.D. for his outstanding work in the field and was elected a fellow of the Royal Society of New Zealand (FRSNZ) in 1999A.D.¹² He also was a visiting Professor in Sikh studies, University of Toronto. In 2000 he received a grant from the Rockefeller Foundation that enabled him to pursue his research in the quiet surroundings of Bellagio on Lake Como in North Italy.¹³

Hew Mcleod died July 20, 2009A.D. in Dunedin, New Zealand after a lengthy illness. He was 77. The world Sikh News mourns his death and also holds that the best way to pay tribute to a scholar who has lived a life so extraordinarily rich is to try and re-engage with his work. It is a sign of the times that in Punjab, virtually no newspaper carried even the news of the death of Hew Mcleod even on Wednesday except a local edition of the Hindustan Times. In the dumped down times, Mcleod's work and its criticism assume all the more importance.¹⁴

I

Mcleod's academic journey in the field of Sikh studies began during the last quarter of the 20th century with his first work on Guru Nanak entitled *Guru Nanak and the Sikh Religion* (1963A.D.). This is the revised version of his doctoral thesis on 'Life and Doctrine of Guru Nanak' (London, 1965A.D.).¹⁵ In his scholarly response to Mcleod's *Guru Nanak and the Sikh Religion*, he has felt 'the need for constructing a fresh narrative of Guru Nanak's life and legacy that is based strictly on contemporaneous sources-texts artifacts and sites'.¹⁶ Mcleod responded to defend himself and deflect the criticism. He insists that his critics are traditionalists or conservative or fundamentalists who do not appreciate and understand his methodology of historical research.¹⁷ Some of his books and research come in far criticism

from Sikh scholars but these were many who admired his tireless work on Sikhism. Sometimes those of us with ties to Hew McLeod are identified as a cohesive group intent on undermining Sikh tradition and falsely using 'Western' concepts in trying to understand Sikhism. Although these charges are false and do not take into account the divergence of questions and use of material, in a sense we all accept the' McLeod badge with a sense of thanks and honour.¹⁸

Hew McLeod is the master of manufacturing controversial issues and then extracts mileage from the issue. If we make comparison of the critics of McLeod, we can divided them into two schools of thought. Firstly we can generally discussed of them who known as professional historians like G.S. Grewal, Fauja Singh, Kirpal Singh, Pashaura Singh, S.S. Hans and Gurinder Singh Maan. The criticism of these critics is authentic and genuine. And second category in this field the Sikh fundamentalist like Baldev Singh, Jasvir Singh and Tirlochan Singh etc.

Hew McLeod has dismissed the criticism of his writing by Trilochan Singh, Sangat Singh, H.S. Dilgeer, S.S. Sodhi and S.S. Kohli as absurd and well off the mark.¹⁹ On the other hand, he was devoted three pages to a friendly review of his book by Fauja Singh. However, he has totally avoided the discussion of Jagjit Singh's works which completely demolished his thesis. The Evolution of the Sikh community built on wild interpretations and speculations and flimsy evidence.²⁰ He has quoted a paragraph from J.S. Grewal's *Contesting Interpretations of Sikh Traditions* that points out the names of Sikh scholars and organization that were created to project a correct image of Sikhism and the Sikh Community in India and abroad and to watch, report and rebut any distortions or misinterpretations of Sikh religion and Sikh history.²¹ However, he makes no mention of the issues raised by Grewal about McLeod approach to the understanding of Sikhism.²² On the whole McLeod is that scholar who is surrounded by both the school of critics.

II

The sources are very important for writing of history, but understanding of all evidence depends on a proper apprenticeship.²³ The sources for the study of early Sikh history and religion are comparatively few. McLeod found that the obvious place to seek information concerning the Life of Guru Nanak was the *Adi Granth* or *Guru Granth Sahib*, *The Janam Sakhi's*, *Vaaran Bhai Gurdas* and *The Mahima Prakash*.²⁴ The *Adi Granth* is the primary scripture of the Sikhs.²⁵ It does offer much that is relevant to our biographical concern, but its contribution to our knowledge of the actual events of Guru Nanak's life is slight.²⁶ In the same manner the Janam-Sakhis are hagiographic accounts of life of Guru Nanak, each consisting of a series of separate incidents, or chapters, entitled *sakhis* or *gosts*. The third main source which was used by W.H. McLeod i.e. first Var of Bhai Gurdas. It is not a Janam-sakhi in the normally accepted sense as apart from four incidents it offers very little information about Guru Nanak's life.²⁷ Another two works which deserve a brief mention are *Mahima Prakas Varataka* and the *Mahima Prakas Kavita*.²⁸ Both written in the 18th century. *Mahima Prakas Varataka*, was written in 1741A.D. by Bawa Kirpal Singh Bhalla, and *Mahima Prakas Kavita* in 1776A.D. by Sarup Das Bhalla, a descendent of Guru Amar Das.²⁹ Both are too recent to be regarded as primary sources for the life of Guru Nanak.³⁰

III

Sikh history begins with Guru Nanak and continues for two centuries through a line of nine successors. It was during these first two centuries that most of the distinctive features of Sikhism as a religion took shape.³¹ Guru Nanak was born on April 15, 1469 A.D., at the Rai Bhoi Ki Talwandi, now known as Nanakana Sahib in Pakistan.³² His father was Kalu, a Bedi Khatri and his mother was named Tripata. Kalu and Tripata had one other child, a daughter whose name was probably Nanaki.³³ To put Nanak in a worldly frame of mind, Nanak was married in 1487 A.D. to Sukhmani, daughter of Mulchand Chona Khatri of Pakhoke Randhawa near Batala. In course of time Nanak had two sons. Sri Chand born in 1494 A.D. and Lakhmi Das born in 1496 A.D.³⁴ While in Sultanpur he experienced a sense of divine call and his message was: 'Na Koi Hindu Na Koi Musalman'.³⁵

Later he gave all the offerings to his hosts for maintaining a free mess called *Langar*, where all divine without any consideration of caste, creed, religion or social status. It is here that all people high or low, rich or poor, male or female, all sit in the same *Pangat* to share and enjoy the food together.³⁶

Having adopted the life of a missionary Nanak decided to go on travels. His travels are called *Udasis*. He traveled on foot with his Muslim companion named Bhai Mardana, a minstrel.³⁷ He visited a number of more important centres of both Hindu and Muslim pilgrimage. The period of travelling probably ended in or shortly before 1520 A.D.³⁸ In his last day, he stay in Kartarpur and must have attracted many disciples, one of whom was Lahina, who choosed by Nanak as a successor of *Panth*.³⁹ Nanak died in 1539 A.D. at Kartarpur, where he spent the last seventeen years of his life with his family and followers.⁴⁰

IV

Nanak not only founded a new religion, but also started a new pattern of living.⁴¹ He is a bridge between man and God. Guru Nanak's composition tell us about God, His nature and attributes and His relation with man and the Universe.⁴² He wished to build a community of self respecting men and women, devoted to God, and to fill them with a sense of religious liberty, social equality and brotherhood for all.⁴³ To get a comprehensive picture of his achievement it is necessary to know the religious and secular aspects of his teaching.⁴⁴

The saying of Nanak, explained by W.H. Mcleod into four ways. Like *Nature of God*, *The Nature of Unregenerate Man*, *The Divine Self-Expression* and *The Discipline*.⁴⁵ In *Nature of God*, Guru Nanak's exposition of God is summed up in the basic formula called *Mul Mantra*.

ੴ ਸਤਿ ਨਾਮੁ ਕਰਤਾ ਪੁਰਖੁ ਨਿਰਭਉ ਨਿਰਵੈਰੁ

ਅਕਾਲ ਮੂਰਤਿ ਅਜੂਨੀ ਸੈਭੰ ਗੁਰ ਪ੍ਰਸਾਦੀ⁴⁶

Nanak believed that God was *Sat* (both truth and reality) as opposed to *asat* (falsehood) and *mithya* (illusion).⁴⁷ God is Himself Creator, Sustainer and Destroyer.⁴⁸ God is formless and immaculate. As *nirguna* He is above the qualities and as *saguna*. He is the repository of all qualities.⁴⁹ Nobody knows the hours of creation. About the creation of universe, Nanak says:

ਸਾਚੇ ਤੇ ਪਵਨਾ ਭਇਆ

ਪਵਨੈ ਛੇ ਜਲੁ ਹੋਇੰ

ਜਲ ਤੇ ਤ੍ਰਿਭਵਣੁ ਸਾਜਿਆ

ਘਟਿ ਘਟਿ ਜੋਤਿ ਸਮੋਇੰ

(Sri Raag, First Mehl)⁵⁰

Nanak further says that God does not merely create, besides He watches over it and cares for it. For Guru Nanak God is a participant in the Life of the universe, which He has established, watching, directing & upholding. He who is creator, as sustainer is also declared to be God the Destroyer and Recreator.⁵¹

In other words God, is for Nanak the sovereign Lord, *abinasi* (eternal) *anadi* (without beginning), *akal* (beyond time), *nirankar* (the formless one).⁵² In second part W.H. Mcleod has described the the nature of unregenerate man in Nanak's saying. For Guru Nanak, Man's nature is dependent upon his affiliation, and that nature is transformed when his affiliation is transferred from the World to the divine Name.⁵³

The word *man* as used by Guru Nanak which is unregenerate of erratic and leads into worldly attachments which are the very antithesis of salvation.⁵⁴ For Guru Nanak it is *haumai* (ego) which controls the man. It is *haumai* which stands between man and God. The outward expression of a man dominated by *haumai* are evil impulses.⁵⁵ These are serially : *Kama* (desire, lust), *Krodh* (Anger, Violence), *Lohba* (Avarice), *Moha* (Attachment), *Ahamkara* (Pride, Egoism).⁵⁶ A Wayward *man* dominated by *haumai* inevitably means involvement in *maya*. *Maya* is basically untruth as opposed to truth.⁵⁷

For all these Nanak had made a notable contribution with regard to how God communicates with human beings. In W.H. Mcleod perception at there are six keywords according to Nanak's teaching which saves man to unregenerate Man : like : Word (*Sabad*), Name (*Nam*), Divine Preceptor (*Guru*), Divine order (*Hukam*), Truth (*Sach*) and Grace (*Nadar*).⁵⁸

Guru Nanak's emphasis is wholly upon the concept of the Word (*sabad*) as the vehicle of revelation.⁵⁹ *Nam* is synonymous with *word (sabad)*. Without the Name of God, there is no salvation.⁶⁰ For both *Guru* is most important, who become the ladder between a person & God. Guru Nanak in *Asa Di Var* highlights Guru's importance:

ਬਿਨ ਸਤਿਗੁਰ ਕਿਨੈ ਨ ਪਾਇਓ

ਬਿਨ ਸਤਿਗੁਰ ਕਿਨੈ ਨ ਪਾਇਆਂ

ਸਤਿਗੁਰ ਵਿਚਿ ਆਪੁ ਰਖਿਓਨੁ

ਕਰਿ ਪਰਗਟ ਆਖਿ ਸੁਣਾਇਆਂ

(Asa Di Var, Pauri 6)⁶¹

Sabad, *Nam* and *Guru* are to be defined as the Truth of God. Truth is to be found through submission to the *Hukam*. *Hukam* directs the path to salvation. Guru Nanak explains the concept of *Hukam*. *Hukam* directs the path to salvation.⁶² Guru Nanak explains the concept of *Hukam* in his *Japji* and writes:

ਹੁਕਮੇ ਅੰਦਰਿ ਸਭ ਕੋ
ਬਾਹਰਿ ਹੁਕਮ ਨ ਕੋਈ
ਨਾਨਕ ਹੁਕਮੈ ਜੇ ਬੁਝੈ
ਤ ਹਉਮੈ ਕਰੈ ਨ ਕੋਈ

(Japji, Pauri 2)⁶³

Guru Nanak preached that the ultimate aim in an individual's life is to achieve salvation or union with Lord. He believed that true religion is expressed within the inner self. Religion is inward and its basic expression is love or more accurately, loving devotion. This loving devotion, a devotion directed to the formless Lord.⁶⁴ *Nam simran* is one of the important gems for spiritual development : with this one can experienced of *Vismad* (Supreme wonder). Nanak explains *Vismad* as a result of true meditation.⁶⁵

ਵਿਸਮਾਦੁ ਨਾਦ ਵਿਸਮਾਦੁ ਵੇਦ
ਵਿਸਮਾਦੁ ਜੀਅ ਵਿਸਮਾਦੁ ਭੇਦੀ

(Asa Di Var, Salok Mehla I)⁶⁶

In his *Japji* (Pauri 35 & 37), Guru Nanak formulates five stages of spiritual development, each of them is called a *Khand* or 'realm'.⁶⁷ Like *Dharma Khand*, *Gian Khand*, *Saram Khand*, *Karam Khand* and *Sach Khand*.

Sach Khand is the goal, the ultimate and purpose of human existence, the final consummation of man's ascent to God. W.H. Mcleod states that He who meditates on the divine Name finds peace, for protected by the Guru's instruction, he cannot be consume by death. Without the Name, the cycle of birth and death remains with us and suffering in our lot.⁶⁸ W.H. Mcleod concludes that the basis of Guru Nanak's theology is a belief in personal God, the omnipotent creator of the universe.⁶⁹

V

Mcleod's perception about Guru Nanak as determinative formulator of the beliefs have ever since constituted the primary basis of the Sikh religion. His life was fully dedicated to evolve higher values of human life from his enlightened knowledge. The sources used by W.H. Mcleod for his monograph of Guru Nanak are primarily the hagiographic accounts called *Janam sakhis*. To conclude we may say that W.H. Mcleod is a author of fifteen books, four edited translations, two edited volumes, three booklets and more than seventy articles published in academic journal and books. His works have been received with much enthusiasm and global critical acclaim.⁷⁰ His historical writing has proved to be a milestone. On the whole McLeod's interpretation of Guru Nanak's life and mission is a very valuable addition in historiography of Guru Nanak in particular and the historiography of the Sikhs and the Punjab in general.

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