

The Concept of Faith: From the Perspective of a Practicing Sikh

Verpal Singh

Antoine Lavoisier, the French Chemist, is a rather unusual starting point for a write-up on Faith. What qualifies him to be part of a discussion on faith is that he is regarded as the founder of Chemistry. It does not mean that before Lavoisier there is no history of human experimentation with chemicals.¹ On the contrary, chemicals have been used by humanity for thousands of years. From the miracles performed by priests and oracles to the perfumed unguents used by Egyptians 5000 years ago² chemicals have played a role in making people happy or frightening them out of their wits. However, what Lavoisier changed was the methodology applied in the use of chemicals. Rather than make use of chemicals through knowledge gained by rote, Lavoisier used empirical methodology to study the behaviour of chemicals, thereby enabling us to have prior inkling of what to expect when chemical A was put in the company of chemical B.

1 In his 50 years of life (B. 1743 – D. 1794.) Lavoisier was able to discredit elemental theories that had held sway for hundreds of years. Unfortunately, all his accomplishments in the field of Chemistry did not help save him from the guillotine in the final days of Terror. He may be seen as one of the original victims of Terrorism, when that particular term was applicable only to governmental behaviour.

2 1st Dynasty of Egypt (about 3100-2907 BC) is the earliest known user of cosmetics. The Egyptians seem to have used perfumed oils to moisturize their skin and keep it unwrinkled in the dry heat. The art of decorating the eyes by applying dark green colour to the lower lid and blackening the lashes and the upper lid with kohl (made from antimony or soot) is also known to have been developed by the Egyptian women.

A direct impact of this change was realisation of limits of what the chemicals can do. For instance, alchemy had for centuries been pursuing the mirage of philosopher's stone. Whether the alchemists came from Greek, Arabian, Medieval Christian, Hindu or Chinese traditions, this pursuit was common to all these different alchemical traditions.³ The pursuit of philosopher's stone combined spiritual elements with material ones as what they were observing was God in action and they invoked God (or devil, according to their inclination) through secret words, chants, prayers, holy water to enable them to change base metals to precious ones at will. This "at will" part of the equation seems to have come from the religion's promise that it can provide the tools necessary to invoke God in one's favour whenever necessary.

When Lavoisier replaced faith with logic, our knowledge of elements increased by leaps and bounds. It was as if some sort of barrier had been broken that enabled us to analyze our observations logically without faith skewing the results. As logic took primacy, we not only started to realize the limitations under which elements work, but also the vastness of the undiscovered world of elemental knowledge and the benefits this ever growing knowledge bank could bring to humanity. From then on pursuits like philosopher's stone lost all shine.

Something similar is happening in the realm of religion, where faith though still holding sway is increasingly seeking the help of science to authenticate the scriptural statements. However, it is still the norm that more unquestioning one's belief, more pious

³ The reason for this commonality seems to flow from the observation that gold occurs in nature in the company of many metals which probably made the alchemists conclude that some process was turning these base metals into precious ones, and if this process could be duplicated they would have discovered the philosopher's stone. Existence of compounds like electrum seemed to bear this out as probably did the recovery of silver in processing of gold.

is one perceived to be. Religion, in fact, demands faith from its followers and promises "the heaven" to those who believe unquestioningly. For those who question a religion's take on some issue using scientific observation, religion seeks to follow a contrary view.⁴

If a contrary view is not possible, it seeks to cite those scientific observations which authenticate some scriptural revelation. The aim usually is to show to the faithful that what the scriptures revealed "hundreds of years ago", science is discovering only now. By implication, the faithful should not lose their faith if science says something that is contrary to the scriptures, for science is lagging "hundreds of years behind" the scriptures when it comes to knowledge of God's creation. For the faithful this can be a very effective argument – after all scriptures are direct revelations from God and who can know more about His⁵ creation than God Himself!

With advances in our collective knowledge and the methods of collating this knowledge, it is my view that organized religion is fighting a losing battle with other two contenders as the sole repository of knowledge of how God's creation works and towards what end. The reason for this may be quite obvious – while claiming to have answers to all our questions, religion demands that we ask no questions.

On the contrary, the two other contenders, philosophy and science, encourage people to question everything. Questioning is seen as the starting point of

⁴ An example may be the advocacy of "Creationism" as an alternative theory to Darwin's theory of evolution explaining how this world, this universe, came into being.

⁵ The attribution of male gender to God is contrary to the Sikh theological principles where God is seen as above and beyond gender. It should be seen as a limitation of language that we use male address for God. An alternative to this might be using "He/She" "Him/Her" which is rather cumbersome. Perhaps with time a gender-neutral alternative exclusive to God might become acceptable.

reasoning, leading to ever greater insights and opening up of new vistas. Questioning a scriptural statement, on the other hand, is seen as an indication of heretical behaviour. Thus, even though science and philosophy do not seek to consciously undermine religion, these two contending seekers of greater understanding of how and why of God's creation, are seen by religion as doing exactly that.

It must be accepted though that virtually all of the modern-day strides made by us in greater understanding of this world and beyond have been made possible primarily by the development of a scientific outlook. This, however, is not to say that religion has no longer anything to offer humanity. On the contrary, religion is still relevant in resolving problems created by unfettered application of science.

The importance of religion (or religious outlook) was illustrated recently during a seminar organised by Auckland Inter-faith Council in collaboration with Auckland City Council.⁶ There were presentations from Zen Buddhist, Roman Catholic, Muslim, Hindu and Mormon traditions on how birth of a child is perceived. Most of the presenters sought to cite scientific evidence authenticating their scriptural statements or religious practices revolving around the phenomenon of birth of a child. The general observation was that all religions see the new born baby as a gift from God. It made one wonder that there is no scientific evidence which proves or disproves that a child is a gift from God. Science can explain every stage of development beginning from the moment a sperm combines with an ovum to the moment when the baby makes the first sound and beyond, but it has no framework

⁶ It was the second in a series of seminars termed "Life Cycle Seminars", dealing with how various religions perceive various stages of life. First seminar was on death and the second on birth. I am not sure why the topic of death was seen as a beginning by the organisers of these seminars.

to tackle the question whether a child is a gift from God or not.

Also, science seems to have perfected the mechanism for garnering knowledge, but it has not been able to integrate into that mechanism, guidelines which would show whether the garnered knowledge is being applied wisely or unwisely – or, to employ religious terminology, righteously or unrighteously. It is religion that can answer this question.

Where religion is lacking is in its insistence on knowledge being static – that what has once been revealed must remain unchallenged throughout time.

Philosophy on the other hand is weak in practicality. Much of philosophy seems to be focused on pondering abstract concepts rather than issues of practical importance to humanity.⁷

Thus we have three approaches to understanding the same thing – God's creation, how it works and towards what end. From the fact that even religious discourse is increasingly citing scientific evidence in support of scriptural statements, one might conclude that science has taken a pre-eminent position in providing answers to our questions.

Is this state of affairs good for the general well-being of humanity?

My view is that science is making the same mistake that religion did – it seems to presume that it has answers to all the questions. Or to put it another way –

⁷ Plato argued that philosophical contemplation of the unseen world of forms is the highest goal of human life. He postulated the existence of a world of unchanging and invisible "forms", or ideas about which it is possible to have exact and certain knowledge. The things one sees and touches are imperfect manifestations of the pure forms of mathematics and philosophy and only the abstract reasoning of these disciplines would yield genuine knowledge, while reliance on sense perception, he claimed, would produce vague and inconsistent opinions.

humanity is repeating its mistakes by thinking that science can provide answers to all its questions. Scientists, it would seem, are the new clergy – or the new prophets.⁸

If we consider religion, science and philosophy as three rivers, then rather than look for answers in one or all of these rivers, we would be best served by looking for answers in the “sea” – where all three combine, as do many other streams.⁹ However, we also need to understand that a fish can never hope to fully fathom the sea. In the Sikh discourse, the analogy of fish’s relationship with sea (or river or simply water) is used at numerous places to illustrate man’s relationship with God.¹⁰ Man is equated with fish and God with water. Man’s state of being unaware of God’s presence is equated with a fish out of water.

“O Almighty! You are like an all-knowing all-seeing river and I am just a fish – how can I find Your measure? Wherever I look, I see only You. The moment I am separated from You, I am in pain and die. I do not know of the fisherman, and I do not know of the fishnet. But when the pain comes, I call upon You.

⁸ In a way, this may not be so far from truth if we accept that there is only one source of knowledge – God. We believe that person to be a prophet to whom, say, God revealed that “the crops of the Jews are failing because they are robbing God by not rendering the full tithes required by the Law and that if they give full tithe God will remove his curse and send rich harvests.” [Malachi in the last prophetic book of Old Testament; fifth prophecy (3:6-12)] Should we not consider, say, Newton as a prophet to whom God revealed the Law that governs motion of objects, big and small?!

⁹ Our understanding of God’s creation and the place we occupy in the bigger scheme of things is enhanced in their own ways by disciplines like anthropology, social sciences, creative arts, etc. A full discussion of this contribution of “other” disciplines is beyond the scope of this paper.

¹⁰ Guru Granth Sahib, the Sikh scripture, see pages 23, 25, 55, 439, 481, 605, 928 amongst others. Guru Granth Sahib is written in Gurmukhi alphabet and in verse form. Its translations, whether in verse or prose, should be seen as only approximations.

“You are present everywhere while I had assumed You to be far away. Whatever I do, I do in Your presence.

“You see all my actions, and yet I continue to deny them. I have not worked for You, nor have I remembered Your Name. Whatever You give me, that is what I consume. There is no other giver – unto which door should I go and knock? Nanak offers this one prayer: this body is Your gift as is this soul. These exist only because You make them.

“God Himself is near everyone, and He Himself is far away; He Himself is in-between too. He Himself takes care of everything, and He Himself listens to everyone’s prayers. By His own power, He brought this world into being. O Nanak, beings should follow the order that meets His approval.”¹¹

A fish needs to be intimately aware of that part of the sea where it ventures day in and day out, and be always on the look out for even minor changes in its surroundings in order to live its life. Sea was there before fish came into being and it will be there when fish dies. Sea’s existence isn’t dependent on fish while fish cannot exist without the sea. While sea sustains numerous entities along with the fish, fish has a set role in not upsetting this regime of sustenance and contributing to it positively. What if the fish starts to think that the sea and everything within exists to serve it (the fish)? The thought seems such a ludicrous one. However, superimpose it on humanity.

We need to be fully aware of our surroundings – worldly wise – in order to live a “successful” life. More worldly wise we are better our chances of success. But most of us seem to think that this world and everything within exists to serve us.¹² In a

¹¹ Guru Granth Sahib, p. 25

¹² Book of Genesis has played no small part in the evolution of this worldview.

way, clergy's main role seems to be to promise humanity that it (the clergy) can invoke God in its favour.¹³ This promise seems to prompt one to think in terms of trying to influence events to fit one's own goals.¹⁴ Thus, we consider ourselves as the centre-of-the-universe – that not only the whole world but even other humans exist to serve our purposes. This lays the ground for seeking commonality of agendas – dividing humanity in clusters according to common agendas, with each cluster trying to influence events in furtherance of its particular agenda. Religion and wealth seem to be the most common binding factors in the construction of these clusters. It does make one wonder why those acting as guardians of religion (the clergy) or wealth (the rich)¹⁵ feel so threatened.

One effect existence of these varied groups has is the suppression of intra-group discussion of beliefs. As every group sees itself at odds with all or most others,¹⁶ it becomes a prerequisite of survival that each group ridicule the belief/agenda of others in order to prove to its adherents its superiority over these others. It is by this mechanism that the “flock” is sought to be kept together. More vulnerable a belief system is to questioning by others, more repressive its approach towards those of its members who

seek an intra-group discussion of these beliefs.¹⁷

The result of this repression, however, is never one intended. It might take time for the questions raised within and without a group to take effect, but sooner or later every question must get its answer. A question once raised lingers on till it elicits a satisfactory answer.¹⁸ Thus, even though religion claims revelation to be timeless (or static), religious beliefs keep evolving with time.

What we are witnessing today is a growing acceptance of scientific outlook over religious or philosophical one. This may be seen as a weakening of faith's hold over humanity. If one is to predict the defining feature of the 21st century, it will most likely be the gradual diminishing of the concept of faith.

Faith, in fact, has always been questioned, from within as well as without. The concept of revelation, as prevalent amongst the Semitic religions, made it necessary that those who questioned faith either had the credentials to be accepted as prophets (with the new revelation or

13 For instance, Hindus have the concept of chanting of mantras and donations to relevant god(s) in order to “force the hand” of god(s) to influence some outcome in one's favour. Christians have the concept of praying to particular Saints for achieving a favourable outcome in some situation.

14 It can be argued that this possibility of influencing god, give and take, is similar to the concept of bribery – those who believe that god may be influenced through chants, prayers and donations, need take only a small step to see that “donations” should be able to influence men as well to act in one's favour.

15 It can be shown that the wealthy act in a very similar manner to that of clergy – feeling it their duty to safeguard the legacy of their forefathers for the future generations while seeing those without wealth (akin to the “unbelievers”) as in need of accepting their superiority.

16 It is not within the scope of this paper to discuss the dynamics of changing group alliances, e.g., fundamentalist Jews and Christians being at loggerheads for centuries, now combining against Islam.

17 Amongst these repressive measures may be cited the refusal of some Christian priests in America to grant communion to those politicians in their congregation who were pro-choice (on the issue of abortion laws) in their public statements.

18 The recent publication of a document titled *The Hope of Salvation for Infants Who Die Without Being Baptised* may be cited as an example. The Vatican's explanation for the publication, which virtually discards the concept of Limbo, was that “People find it increasingly difficult to accept that God is just and merciful if He excludes infants, who have no personal sins, from eternal happiness, whether they are Christian or non-Christian.” Something that is being downplayed in this whole issue is that a question mark has been put on the concept of Original Sin, an abhorrence to an increasing number of people; for Baptism is preached as a prerequisite of entry to heaven, as it rids oneself of Original Sin. Now that the Church has accepted that non-baptised infants are also eligible to enter heaven, it can only be seen as a negation of the concept of Original Sin. It may also be seen as acceptance by the Catholic Church (to a certain degree) of the Anabaptists' view of baptism.

prophecy superseding the earlier one) or end up being banished or executed.¹⁹

In order to understand the absurdity of this situation, consider for a moment a hypothetical scenario:

The 17th century accepted Newton as a prophet through whom God had revealed the Laws of Motion to mankind. When Einstein questioned some of Newton's statements in the 20th century, some of Newton's more staunch followers started accusing Einstein of heresy. Einstein was subjected to death threats and other forms of persecution which prompted his followers to protest against atrocities being committed by Newton's followers. Today, Newtonians continue to argue the infallibility of their prophet's revelation while Einsteinians have quietly convinced some governments to support their prophet's revelation over any other.

This in a nutshell is the crux of the problem inherent in the concept of faith. Knowledge is fluid and it is ever growing. To claim that everything that was said two or three thousand years ago is the truth when all the evidence suggests otherwise, may only be termed rather unreal. This does not mean that one is arguing that everything that was written two-three thousand years ago has become irrelevant, rather that some parts may have become superseded with new knowledge and insights that humanity has gained over this period. Just as without

¹⁹ One may conjecture that if Jesus (who was addressed as Rabbi but didn't fulfil the requirements to be universally accepted as one) had come from a rabbinical family, his teachings would probably have been added after Malachi's and the centuries of Jewish-Christian strife may never have occurred.

Newton's discoveries Einstein would not have been able to postulate his Special Theory of Relativity, it is a given that a big gap would be left in what little we know about the how and why of God's creation if even one of the revered religious figures' contribution is negated.

Our knowledge may be equated to a wall of bricks, with the present being seen as the top of that ever-growing wall. What we know today has been built over time brick by brick. A centuries old belief that we may now know to be untrue or irrational still contributed to humanity's understanding by providing a contrast to what we now know to be true or rational. And what we know today to be "true" may be challenged tomorrow.

It is the proposition of this paper that faith-based religion that we know today has its days numbered. Humanity as a whole has become more reliant on reason rather than faith. Religion too must start depending on reason, as opposed to faith, in its discourse with humanity.²⁰

This is possible only when religion becomes non-denominational.²¹ For it is only in a non-denominational environment that the apparent irrationalities may be

²⁰ Sikhism is one religion that demands from its followers that they continuously ponder and analyze and depend on their intellect (the non-egotistic kind) while dealing with mundane and spiritual matters. "It is intellect that tells us how to remember God; it is intellect that earns us honour; it is intellect that makes us understand what we read; and it is intellect that should guide even our philanthropy. Nanak says, 'This is the only way. If someone claims to know another way, they are being less than truthful.'" [Guru Granth Sahib, page 1245]

²¹ Many philosophers have tackled the issues seen as the domain of religion, in a non-denominational manner. The works of Spinoza readily come to mind. The fact that there are some uncanny similarities between Spinoza's propositions and Sikh weltanschauung may be seen as an indicator that Sikhism, in its approach, is closer to what West sees as philosophy rather than what it sees to be a religion. In fact, it may be shown that Sikhism combines the philosophical thinking with scientific outlook to chart a path of life that aims to bring contentedness to those who walk it.

discarded without any need for the arrival of a new messiah to do so.

Verpal Singh heads The Sikh Centre, a not-for-profit organisation engaged in promoting greater interaction between Sikhs and the wider New Zealand community. He also runs a small publishing company specialising in niche areas. He is a writer, with a novel and a book of analytical essays in the pipeline. Through the Sikh Centre, he has been involved in running three annual competitions in the field of Painting, Short story Writing, and traditional Punjabi embroidery art of Phulkari. He is an active participant in the ongoing inter-faith dialogue amongst various faith communities of New Zealand. Verpal Singh is a keen student of history, especially religious history

