

Religious Responsibilities Toward Wealth: A Comparison Between Islam and Sikhism

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Abstract

This paper is an attempt to reveal a comparison in religious duties and responsibilities toward wealth in Islam and Sikhism. Islam and Sikhism are chosen because both religions have so many common elements in term of teachings, concepts, practices and beliefs. Furthermore, they have a unique and intimate relation historically. This paper analyzes the practice, concepts and philosophy of *zakat* in Islam and *dasvanth* in Sikhism. Data were collected through library research, interviews and observation. After the concepts, practice and philosophy of both practices sufficiently studied and understood, the data then analyzed comparatively to find out elements of convergence and elements of divergence. It is found that there are some similarities or parallel elements between the two religions in this regard. However, upon a close analysis, there are also differences that make the two religions diverge to different goals.

Keywords: Sikhism; religious responsibilities; wealth; sadaqah; comparative religion

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1.0 INTRODUCTION

This article is a comparative analysis on religious responsibilities toward wealth between Islam and Sikhism. Both Islam and Sikhism have their own beliefs and practices related to the responsibilities toward wealth. In Islam, the responsibilities toward wealth owned by a person are called zakat and sadaqah, while in Sikhism they are called dasvant and sewa. The comparison in this study is made on various aspects of both religious in this regard including definition, concept and practice. Aspects of similarities and differences in this matter between the two religions were analyzed and conclusions are made based on the analysis.

The main objective of this paper is to reveal the comparative analysis in the philosophy and concept of religious responsibilities toward wealth and earnings between Islam and Sikhism. Both religions are selected to be studied and compared because they are so close to each other in various regards. Relations between Islam and Sikhism have so many privileges and uniqueness as there are so many similarities and parallels between the two. These similarities in understanding could be found in some concept like concept of God, concept of man and humanity, concept of prophet and guru, concept of sacred revelation, concept of spirituality and so on. However, beside the similarities and parallels in some parts of these concepts, indeed, there are also fundamental differences especially in matters related to issues like philosophy and goal of life.

2.0 REVIEW OF LITERATURE

There are not many studies and materials available on Sikhism compared to other world religions. As such, the references and sources on this religion are therefore comparatively limited. There are some books written about Sikhism in the Punjabi and English language and very few in the Malay language. It is also difficult to find literature of Sikhism in Arabic language. Since Sikhism is considered as a new religion, the discussion about it could not be found in the early Islamic treaties written by outstanding early Muslim scholars such as al-Ghazzālī, Imām al-Bāqillānī, Imām al-Shahrastānī, Ibn Ḥazm al-Andalūsī¹ and others.

The studies and records of Sikhism in Malaysia are also meagre. Sarjit Singh Gill narrated from the late Prof. Kernail Singh Sandhu that there were no separate worthy records relating to Sikh immigration kept either in India or in Malaya (Gill, 2003). In Malaysia, there are only about 60 extensive researches that have been conducted on Sikhs up to date. Sarjit Singh Gill divides these researches into nine categories as follows:

¹These are some of the Islamic scholars who are involved in comparative religion studies. They have written books and comments on other religions but did not include Sikhism because Sikhism did not exist yet at their time.

- a. Religion and culture
- b. Language and education
- c. Biography
- d. Gender
- e. Demography
- f. Security
- g. Politics
- h. Social and identity change
- i. History

The most recent books about the Sikh community in Malaysia are some books on general information of Sikh community. One of the books is written by Saran Singh Sidhu, entitled *Sikh Gurdwaras in Malaysia and Singapore; An Illustrated History 1873-2002* (Sidhu S. S., 2003). This book, as the topic suggests is a document in brief about the history of the Sikhs since their first presence in Malaysia and Singapore in the early 1850's and the illustration of all Gurdwaras in Malaysia and Singapore.

Perhaps, one of the latest publications on Sikhism in Malaysia is written by Tan Sri Dato' Seri Darshan Singh Gill entitled: *Sikh Community in Malaysi* (Gill D. S., 2009) published in 2009. This pictorial book is mainly about the historical development of the Malaysian Sikhs community. It also discusses the origins of Sikhism, beliefs and identity, religious institutions, culture and tradition, festival and celebrations, organizations and some outstanding achievements of Sikhs in Malaysia in various sectors and fields.

Other literatures regarding Sikhism and Sikhs are written by Bhagat Singh Hira in his book *Semitic Religious Thought and Sikhism* (Hira, 1992). He makes a comparative study between Sikhism and Semitic religions including Zoroastrianism, Judaism, Christianity and Islam. The author discusses a wide range of subjects in both religions, but not in depth. Since it was written by a Sikh, the discussion about Islam and Sikhism naturally hitches upon the perspective of a Sikh and meant for the Sikh readers, and in fact aims to enhance Sikhism. Ishar Singh in his two volumed book *The Philosophy of Guru Nanak; A Comparative Study* (Singh, 1988) gives a brief comparative analysis between Sikhism and other religions. The religions discussed in his book are Hinduism, Jainism, Buddhism, Zoroastrianism, Judaism, Christianity, Islam and Sikhism. The author explains in brief the historical background and some basic elements in the other religions and then discusses in quite detail about Sikhism.

Among the literature available on Sikhism, most focus on the teachings, beliefs, sources, practices and history of Sikhism. One important book is by W.H. McLeod, *Guru Nanak and the Sikh Religion*, which has become a source book for studying the history of Guru Nanak (McLeod, 1968). Another book written by him is: *Early Sikh Tradition; a Study of Janam-Sakhis* (McLeod, Early Sikh Tradition: a Study of Janam Sakhis, 1980). He discusses in detail in this book about the *Janam-Sakhis*, the historical evidences of Guru Nanak and its importance in understanding the development of Sikhism. He also has edited a book with the title *Textual Sources for the Study of Sikhism* (McLeod, 1984). This book is mainly about the literature source of Sikhism as well as the historical background of Guru Nanak and some teachings of Sikhism. He also includes in this book some modern works in Sikhism done by modern Sikh scholars. Another book written by him is *Who is Sikh? The Problem of Sikh Identity* (McLeod, 1989). This book mainly discusses about the meaning of being a Sikh and the beliefs and practices in Sikhism.

Harban Singh in his book; *Guru Nanak and the Origins of the Sikh Faith* (Singh H. , 1969), discusses about the historical background of Guru Nanak as well as the development of the Sikh faith. K.S. Duggal in his book; *Philosophy and Faith of Sikhism* (Duggal, 1982) discusses about the tradition of Sikhism and the problems faced by modern Sikhs in India in facing the issues of modernism such as secularism and freedom.

Max Arthur Macauliffe, in his book; *The Sikh Religion; Its Gurus, Sacred Writings and Authors* (Macauliffe, 1985) discusses about the overall content of the Sikh religion. The discussions include the life of its founder and the background of all the Sikh Gurus. Cole W. Owen claims that Macauliffe's work on Sikhism is based on political reasons (Cole, 1997).

W. Owen Cole in his book; *The Sikhs, Their Religious Beliefs and Practices* (Cole, 1978), provides a multi-dimensional introduction to the Sikh faith, covering background, practices as well as beliefs. For the most part, his approach is descriptive but attention is also given to various ways in which Sikhism has been regarded by scholars.

In the Malay language, there are a few books written on Sikhism. In 1969, the Sikh Naujawan Sabha Malaysia published a book about the religion of Sikhism in the Malay language. The title of the book is *Ugama Sikh* (Sikh Religion) and it is a brief explanation about Sikhism in many aspects including the background of Sikhism, some religious concepts and principles (SNSM, 1969). Another book of Sikhism is in the Indonesian language written by Joesoef Sou'yb entitled: *Agama-Agama Besar di Dunia* (Major Religions of the World) and it includes Sikhism as one of the religions discussed in the book. The discussion of Sikhism in this book is meant for general readings (Sou'yb, 1983).

For Islamic theology, this research will rely on the sources produced by both the classical Muslim scholars as well as the contemporary scholars. The primary sources from the classical Muslim scholars which will be looked into are *Kitāb Maqālāt al-Islāmiyyīn wa Ikhtilāf al-Muṣallīn* (Ash'ari A. H., 1999), *Al-Ibānah 'an Usūl al-Diyānah* (Ash'ari A. H., 2007) and *Al-Luma' fī Rad 'ala Ahl al-Zaigh wa al-Bida* (Ash'ari A. H., 1952) all of which are by al-Imām Abū Ḥasan 'Alī bin Ismā'il al-Ash'arī (260H/873C.E.-324 H/935 C.E.). In his book *Kitāb Maqālāt al-Islāmiyyīn wa Ikhtilāf al-Muṣallīn* (The Discourses of the Proponents of Islam and the Differences among the Worshippers), he discusses the Islamic theology through the discussion of various theological groups and schools of thought in Islam. This book is considered as an encyclopaedia of Islamic sects. His book *al-Ibānah 'an Usūl al-Diyānah* (The Clear Statement on the Fundamental Elements of the Faith) is a polemical and apologetic exposition of basic dogma, ostensibly written against the Mu'tazilah. The discussion in these books will be very useful in understanding Islamic theology.

Another scholar is al-Imām al-Ghazzālī in his book *Ihyā' 'Ulūm al-Dīn* and *Kitāb al-Iqtiṣād fī al-'Itiqād*. *Ihyā' 'Ulūm al-Dīn* (The Revival of the Religious Sciences) is widely regarded as the greatest work on Muslim spirituality. This book is divided into four parts each part containing ten chapters. The first part deals with knowledge and the requirements of faith-ritual purity, prayer, charity, fasting, pilgrimage, recitation of the al Qurān, among others. Part Two concentrates mostly on people and society-the manners relating to eating, marriage, earning a living, friendship. Parts Three and Four are dedicated to the inner life of the soul and discuss first the vices that people must overcome in themselves and then the virtues that they must strive to achieve.

Al-Imām al-Baqillānī's book *Kitāb al-Tamhīd* (Baqillānī, 1934) is very useful to understand the methodology of early Muslim scholars in refuting other religions while explaining Islamic theology. He is considered as one of the most prominent leaders of the Ash'arite theological school.

Al-Baghdādī in his book *Al-Farq Baina al-Firaq* (Baghdādī, 1939) is very helpful in understanding the Islamic theology from the perspective of *Ahl al-Sunnah wa al-Jamā'ah*. The author discusses various deviant groups in Islam before explaining the true path of Islamic theology. The work of al-Imām al-Shahrastānī is also very important in understanding various schools of thought in Islam. He is considered as one of leaders among *Ahl al-Kalām* (theologians). His book *Al-Milal wa al-Niḥal* (Shahrastānī, 1374H) will be looked into.

From all the books listed above, there are only two books which give comparative views of Sikhism and Islam, i.e. one by Bhagat Singh Hira and the other by Ishar Singh and these are general in approach. The other books listed above do not discuss Sikhism and Islam comparatively.

A PhD thesis written by Idris Ismail; *A Study of Parallel Concepts in the Beliefs of Sikhism and Islam with Reference to Sikhism in Malaysia* (Ismail, 2012) is one of the latest documents in comparative study between Islam and Sikhism in Malaysia. This thesis focuses on the similarities and differences in the aspect of beliefs in both religions.

As such, there is a need to conduct comparative studies of Sikhism and Islam, particularly in Malaysia in order to develop better understanding between these two communities. Studying the list of the materials available above, it is felt that this is a kind of vacuum in the field of comparative study between Sikhism and Islam. This study is thus aimed to contribute in fulfilling this vacuum as well as to promote the study of the religions of Malaysia in particular and world religions in general.

■3.0 METHODOLOGY

This is an analytical comparative study on religious obligations toward wealth and earnings in two religions, i.e. Islam and Sikhism. Data were collected from library research, interviews as well as observations. Various sources of information such as books, journals, PhD thesis, websites and articles are among the references in this study. Interviews were also conducted with some prominent Sikhs in Malaysia.

Information and details related to the practice of both religions in this regard is studied and analyzed comparatively to discover the elements of convergence as well as the elements of divergence. Objective and systematic study were conducted in the attempt to understand the issue in both religions as accurate as is feasible.

According to al-Bīrūnī, in order to create a “scientific study” on religions other than one's own, the researcher must equip himself with the proper attitude and aptitude, and to be conscious of the difficulties involved. Criteria such as strong intellectual honesty, high regard for justice and truthfulness, objectivity and accuracy need to be possessed by a researcher (Biruni)². Thus, for this study, the authentic sources of information and data from both religions are relied upon. As such, data about Sikhism will be taken from Sikh sources and data about Islam will be taken from Islamic sources.

■4.0 CONCEPT OF ZAKAT AND SADAQAH IN ISLAM

In Islam, Muslims' responsibilities toward wealth are divided into two, i.e. *fardh* (obligatory or mandatory) and *sunnah* (charity or voluntary). The first part is called zakat; a practice of giving a specific rate of personal's wealth to a specific group of peoples as prescribed by the Quran and the Hadith. It is one of the five pillars of Islam. Literally, zakat means growth, multiplicity, fertility, cleansing, full or barakah as mentioned in the Quran, surah al Tawbah: 103 and ar Rum: 39.

In the Quran, Allah reminds Muslims to give zakat in many occasions, and sometimes it is mentioned immediately after stating to establish prayers (salat). Mentioning zakat together with salat is an indicator of the importance of the zakat in Islam. Allah says in Quran:

“Establish Prayer (Salat) and give zakat and obey the messenger (Rasul) that you may receive mercy (from Allah)” (an-Nur: 24:56)

The significance of giving zakat by the owners of wealth is that all wealth belongs to Allah who bestows wealth to whom He pleases. In that sense, nobody is exclusive owner if his wealth although recognized as such by the secular laws of the countries of the world. Those who do not have wealth for their basic needs and as such are destitute have right in the wealth of wealthy persons (Salahuddin, 1999).

Since zakat is an obligation that must be fulfilled in Islam, so whoever does not perform it will face serious threats from God. It is clear in the Quran from surah Ali Imran 3:180, Surah al Tawbah 9:35, and in hadith narrated by Bukhari (Sahih Bukhari, hadith no. 486) that those who do not give zakat will face severe punishment from God.

■5.0 CONCEPT OF WAND KAY SHAKO (DASVANTH AND SEWA) IN SIKHISM

Three main pillars of the teaching of Sikhism are Naam Japo, Kirat Karni and Wand Kay Shako. **Naam Japo**, **Naam Jaap** or **Naam Japna** the first pillar means the remembrance of God by repeating and focusing the mind on His name or identity. **Kirat Karni**, the second pillar means to work and earn by the sweat of the brow in a honest way, to live a family way of life, and practice truthfulness and honesty in all dealings. The term **Wand Kay Shako**, the third pillar means to share ones wealth with others in the community, to give to charity, to distribute in Langar (free Kitchen) and to generally help others in the community who need help. The other term for this pillar is **Vand Ke Chakna** which means to share the fruits of one's labor with others before considering oneself. This religious obligation or duty is a

²Sachau, *The Chronology*, chapter (al-Bīrūnī, *Kitāb al-Āthār*, chapter 1), and Sachau, Alberuni's India, chapter 1 (al-Bīrūnī, *Kitāb al-Hind*, chapter 1). For analysis, see Kamar Oniah Kamaruzaman, *Early Muslim Scholarship in Religionswissenschaft*, (Malaysia: International Institute of Islamic Thought and Civilization (ISTAC), 2003), 76.

form of *seva* or humble service which is highly valued in the Sikh system. The reference for this duty is mentioned in Grant Sahib as follow:

“One who works for what he eats, and gives some of what he has - O Nanak, he knows the Path”.
(GS p 1245)

It is also mentioned in Sikh Reht Maryada that a Sikh should regard a poor person’s mouth as the Guru’s cash offering box (2009). The Sikh custom of *daswandh* was codified in the *Rehatnamas* written during the lifetime of Guru Gobind Singh, or soon after. For instance, Bhai Nand Lal issues the directive: “Earn your livelihood and put a tenth part of it in the mouths of Sikhs” (Wazir Singh, 1992). Explaining the life of a Sikh, Choor Singh Sidhu says that Guru Nanak, the founder of Sikhism advocated a householder’s life, with emphasis on hard work, honest means for a livelihood, and sharing earnings with others in need (Sidhu, 2001). Wazir Singh quoted from an early eighteen-century document (known as *Prem Sumarag*) believed to be the work of a close associate and contemporary of Guru Gobind Singh, which lays down the doctrinal bases and principles of corporate living and state polity for the Sikh community. The gist of some of the important passages from the treatise is rendered by Professor J.S. Grewal in the following term:

“For a Sikh the communal brotherhood was more important than the ties of kinship. A Sikh should always be ready to share his food, clothes and other belongings with the needy; and if he were in a position to be of any service to others, he should jump at the opportunity regarding it as a mark of God’s grace”.
(Wazir Singh, 1992)

Based on this religious obligation, Sikhs are expected to contribute at least 10% of their wealth or earnings and is called *dasvanth*. *Dasvanth* or *daswandh* literally means a “tenth part” and refers to the practice among Sikhs of contributing in the name of the Guru one-tenth of their earnings towards the common resources of the community (Wazir Singh, 1992). According to Cole and Sambhi, *dasvanth* is the giving of one-tenth of one’s income to the service of the Panth³. The practice was begun by Guru Amar Das and was an obligation placed upon all true Sikhs (Cole, 1997). The contribution is voluntary in spirit, even though made under the inspiration of the Guru, and subsequently becoming an article of the Sikh faith in the form of *daswandh*. The fund collected is utilized in the administration of service rendered to the community, in the form of free kitchen, dwelling units for pilgrims, educational institutions and of course helping the destitute (Wazir Singh, 1992). Explaining the practice of *dasvant* in Malaysia, Autar Singh says that *dasvanth* is given for spiritual purposes. It could be given through *gurdwara* or sometimes directly to the needy and the poor (Autar Singh, interview).

■6.0 RESULTS: COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS

Elements of Convergence:

- a. Both Islam and Sikhism have the same kind of concept of wealth, i.e. wealth belongs to God who bestows wealth to whom He pleases.
- b. Both Islam and Sikhism emphasize on religious social obligations of helping the needy and poor.
- c. Both Islam and Sikhism agree that taking some part of one’s wealth is important for purification.
- d. In practice, both Muslims and Sikhs are giving their *zakat* or *dasvanth* either directly to the poor and the needy or they give it through certain institutions. In Islam, there are some institutions like *baitulmal*, *masjid* and *zakat* collection centers. In Sikhism, Sikhs give their *dasvanth* to be managed by *Gurdwara*.

Elements of divergence

- a. In Islam, *zakat* is compulsory and it is one of the five pillars of Islam. Severe threats of punishments are provided by God for those who fail to fulfill the duty. Whereas in Sikhism, the *dasvanth* is a voluntary and no threat or punishment is mentioned for those who do not fulfill the duty. However, it is strongly emphasize in this religion.
- b. In Islam, generally the amount of *zakat* is 2.5% of the earnings, whereas in Sikhism, the amount of *dasvant* is one-tenth of the earnings. It shows that the amount for *dasvant* given by Sikhs is four times bigger than the amount of *zakat* given by Muslim.

■7.0 CONCLUSION

Based on the above exposition, there are elements of convergence as well as elements of divergence in the aspect of religious obligations toward wealth in both Islam and Sikhism. After making a comparative analysis between the *zakat* in Islam and *dasvant* in Sikhism, it is found that there are a number of elements that they have in common. But, upon close study, it is discovered that these similarities and parallels are fundamentally different and indeed the two religions are leading to different goals. Moreover, in general, besides these similarities, there are many other concepts and practices which are different and even contradictory.

³Panth is originally a Sanskrit word literally refers to a path or way, but is now used to describe groups who follow a particular teacher or doctrine. It is a name used by Sikhs to describe the community. (Cole, 1997)

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