

# THE SHRINE *of* WISDOM

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## NANAK AND THE SIKH RELIGION

### PART II\*

#### THE SIKH RELIGION

The Sikh religion which Nanak founded was almost unknown outside India until comparatively recent times, but within the last forty or fifty years different accounts of its teachings and translations of its scriptures have been published in English and other languages, thus bringing it to the notice of students in various lands.

Its outstanding characteristics are the special emphasis laid upon the unity of God, as the basis of all true religion; the practical manner in which it applies the principle of unity in actual life, religious, moral, political, and economic, and the non-partisan nature and simplicity of its teachings.

It has been called the religion of householders, for it stresses the truth that every kind of activity, even that related to the most ordinary mundane work, may be made a means of spiritual progress when it is performed as an act of devotion; thereby investing the common duties of life with a real dignity and endowing them with an ideal significance and therefore with an elevative power.

Perhaps the most valuable lesson which the Sikh religion has to teach is this unification of the mystical and practical in individual and collective life: a lesson which, although implied in all religions and taught in various forms, mankind needs continually to learn and apply.

Simplicity was gained by concentration upon monotheistic teachings, by the rejection of superstitious beliefs and observ-

\* For Part I see *Shrine of Wisdom* No. 107.

ances, by the discontinuance of obligatory pilgrimages to distant holy places, and the avoidance of excesses of all kinds. The middle path between the two extremes of asceticism and luxuriousness by which a balanced, harmonious life can be achieved, was advocated for all.

For the proper understanding of a religion one of the most important requisites is a knowledge of its history and of the influence which its early leaders had in formulating and establishing its fundamental principles and its external organization. A brief account therefore is given of the lives of the *gurus* and of the special contributions which they made to the religion during the formative period of its history.

Nanak was followed by a succession of nine great leaders or *gurus*, who, by applying and developing his teachings, consolidated the Sikh religion, and left an indelible impression upon it.

The title *guru* signifies "leader", "teacher", and "venerable". In the Sikh religion it is particularly applied to Nanak, but was passed on in turn to each of his chief successors, who were regarded as directly participating in his spirit and mission. It is a title used so frequently and prominently in the teachings and hymns that it has become a characteristic term in the religion, which, therefore, might be called "The Religion of the *Gurus*". But this especially so because of its use not merely in relation to human leaders but to God Himself, *Wahguru* being one of the Names ascribed by them to Deity, The *Guru* of *gurus*, The Teacher of teachers.

"The *Guru* of *gurus* is but one, though He has many forms."  
Nanak.

"God acteth Himself and causeth to act: He adorneth men by  
His Word. He Himself is the true *Guru*." Rām Dās.

#### ANGAD (A.D. 1504-1552)

Angad was appointed by Nanak as his successor in 1537, in preference to either of his own sons on account of his great sincerity and devotion to duty, in which qualities his sons were deficient. Angad faithfully continued the work of his great predecessor, loyally following his instructions, steadfastly adhering to the principles laid down by him, and zealously propagating his teachings.

He was born in humble circumstances and earned his living by making twine.

He collected and caused to be committed to writing the details of the life and teachings of Nanak, together with those of certain other great mystics representative of a similar line of tradition.

His name is associated with that of Nanak in the invention of the simplified form of the Sanskrit characters called *Gurmukhi* used by the Sikhs.

When appointing his successor, he, like Nanak, rejected his own sons, since they lacked the necessary humility and faithfulness to duty.

#### AMAR DĀS (A.D. 1479-1574)

This *guru* did not assume office until he had reached the advanced age of seventy-five and held it for about twenty-two years. He was distinguished by his noble humility and by his zealous service of the Sikh faith and of his fellow men.

Angad said of him: "He is the home of the homeless, shelter of the shelterless, support of the supportless, friend of the friendless."

He organized and maintained a public kitchen open to all, at which all classes had to eat at the same table. The famous Emperor Akbar, when visiting the *guru*, willingly conformed to this rule and was so pleased with Amar Dās and his work that he presented him with a large sum of money, which the *guru* immediately gave instructions should be distributed to the poor.

The common practice of *suttee*, or the immolation of widows, was strongly denounced by him, and he emphasized the importance and sanctity of human life together with the moral obligation of using it for the fulfilment of the highest ends.

Amar Dās sent out a number of disciples to preach and teach the doctrines of the Sikh religion, thus extending its influence into different parts of the country.

#### RĀM DĀS (A.D. 1534-1581)

Rām Dās was the son-in-law of Amar Dās, who, after testing

him in various ways and finding him worthy to continue the work, made him his successor in 1574.

Rām Dās was esteemed for his devoutness, learning, and eloquence. He also possessed considerable literary ability, and several of his hymns are contained in the *Granth*.

He gave away nearly all the money that he received and adopted a life of extreme simplicity and frugality.

During a time of famine in the land he persuaded the Emperor Akbar to remit taxes to the very poor for a year, and in this way much privation was prevented. The Emperor is said to have offered twelve villages to Rām Dās, but the latter declined the offer, thinking that trouble might arise from the proposed transfer.

He began the excavation of Amritsar, "The Lake of Nectar", and changed the name of the town where it was situated from Ramdaspur to Amritsar, after the name of the lake. This became the sacred city and centre of the Sikh community.

Rām Dās was the first *guru* to appoint his own son as successor, after which the office became hereditary.

#### ARJAN (A.D. 1563-1606)

Rām Dās had three sons. The eldest, Prithia Chand, was disobedient and untruthful; the second, Mahādev, preferred the life of devotion and reclusion to the more active life entailed in leadership. Neither of these two, therefore, was suitable for that position. The youngest son, Arjan, however, possessed in an eminent degree the necessary qualities and was consequently nominated for that office by his father, and was duly installed as *guru* on the death of Rām Dās.

It is related that Amar Dās had a special liking for his grandson Arjan, and said of him: "This grandson of mine shall be a boat to take mankind across the ocean of the world."

Soon after Arjan assumed leadership, his brother Prithia complained that he and Mahādev had been left without a share in their father's estate, so Arjan handed it over to them, and henceforth depended for the supply of his needs upon the offerings of his followers. Prithia resented not having been made *guru* and attempted to injure his brother on several occasions.

Arjan possessed high constructive and executive ability, and was also a poet. He showed great forbearance during malicious and unjust persecution and injury and set an example of selflessness and patience in adverse circumstances, and of true resignation to the divine will.

Arjan was in many respects the most important of Nanak's successors, for he did much valuable work which greatly influenced the subsequent development of the Sikh religion.

He was largely responsible for organizing the life of the Sikhs on a communal basis; for the formulation of rules for the guidance of the religious life and laws of social government; for stimulating the arts and crafts and industry, and for the extension of trade with other countries.

The practice of giving one-tenth of the income for national purposes was introduced by Arjan.

Realizing the advantages of having a definite centre for worship and for the government of the Sikhs, he hastened the work of excavation of the lake Amritsar and, when this was completed, laid the foundations of a temple in the middle of it, which was called *Har Mandar*, The Temple of God, or The Golden Temple. This was open on all sides, thus signifying that all were invited to worship there.

Arjan undertook the compilation of an official volume of hymns for use in public and private devotions. It was composed of hymns by his Sikh predecessors, and Hindu and Muslim saints, and included many of his own hymns. This volume was the first form of the *Granth Sāhib*, the Holy Scripture of the Sikhs.

The Emperor Akbar, who was a wise ruler, and well disposed to the Sikhs, paid several visits to the three *gurus* who held office during his reign, and appreciated their personal characters, their teachings and religion. One of his officials, Chandu Lal, however, was an enemy of Arjan and sought to antagonize Akbar against him, stating that the *Granth* contained passages which were deprecative of Mohammed and the Muslim religion. Akbar gave instructions that the *Granth* should be brought to him, and on its arrival he selected one of the hymns and asked the Sikh who had brought the *Granth* to read it to him. On hearing the hymn he was greatly pleased. Chandu Lal then requested that someone else who knew Gurmukhi should read

certain other of the hymns. But the Emperor was even more pleased with these and said, "Excepting love and reverence to God, I so far find neither praise nor blame of anyone in the *Granth*. It is a volume worthy of reverence."

Chandu Lal soon made another attempt to injure Arjan, this time through Jahangir, who on the death of his father Akbar had assumed rulership. Akbar had nominated Jahangir's son Khusro for the throne, but the latter had rebelled and fled from his father. Having insufficient money to take him to his destination, Khusro sought aid from Arjan who, seeing his need and remembering all that Akbar had done for the Sikhs, granted his request. On hearing of this Chandu Lal informed Jahangir of what had taken place, adding that Arjan had told Khusro that he would become Emperor; and at the same time he made accusations against Arjan, who was accordingly summoned to the court. Realizing that he would be put to death, Arjan appointed his son Hargobind to succeed him.

Jahangir imposed a heavy fine upon Arjan and ordered him to delete certain hymns from the *Granth*. Arjan refused to comply with either of these commands, and was told that he must either obey or be imprisoned. The Sikhs offered to pay the fine, but Arjan rejected their offer because of the injustice of the imposition. He was then given into the charge of Chandu Lal and put to great torture. All of this he bore in silence and with equanimity, saying, "I bear this torture to set an example to the teachers of the True Name, that they may not lose patience or rail at God in affliction."

The torture of Arjan was continued for five days, then after having performed his devotions and sent messages to his son, Hargobind, he died.

Arjan's martyrdom unified and strengthened the community of the Sikhs and intensified their faith. It marked the beginning of a new phase in their history, in which they became organized on a definite military basis.

#### HARGOBIND (A.D. 1595-1644)

Hargobind, Arjan's only son, acceded to office when only eleven years of age. Prithia had tried to have him poisoned, then to bring about his death by the bite of a cobra, and lastly to

cause him to be infected with smallpox. All of these attempts, however, were unsuccessful.

Following the instructions of Arjan, Hargobind, assuming the military as well as the spiritual leadership, trained the Sikhs in the art of warfare, in order to protect the faith from oppression and to ensure the development of the community without external interference.

He built mosques for the Mohammedans at his own expense, and established several public institutions. He also engaged in various political activities.

Under the new regime the Sikhs acquired an increased national dignity and intensity of character, and became capable of defending themselves against tyranny and persecution.

Further trouble arose through Chandu Lal, however, who insinuated to Jahangir that the Sikhs were becoming a danger to his state and suggested that he should demand payment of the fine which had been imposed upon Arjan.

Hargobind was summoned to appear before the Emperor, and upon refusing to pay the fine was imprisoned. Before long, however, learning of Chandu Lal's duplicity, Jahangir liberated the *guru*, and treated him as a friend, bestowing many gifts upon him.

During the latter part of Hargobind's life the Sikhs were involved in several battles with Shah Jahan, who had succeeded Jahangir, and had allowed himself to be adversely influenced against them. In these battles the Sikhs were victorious, often against overwhelming forces, and showed great bravery and military efficiency. Their treatment of the defeated foes was most exemplary.

#### HAR RĀI (A.D. 1630-1661)

Har Rāi, the grandson of Hargobind, had a quiet and somewhat retiring character and sought the devotional rather than the active life. He endeavoured by disbanding many of the troops, to restrain the development of the military spirit amongst his followers, and to avoid being entangled in political and other complications. He had a keen sense of justice and showed firmness and fearlessness in the execution of his duties in upholding the rights of the religion and community. He strongly

protested against the tyranny and persecution of the Emperor Aurangzeb.

HAR KRISHAN (A.D. 1656-1665)

Har Krishan, the second son of Har Rāi, was made his successor when little more than five years old, because the elder son lacked the requisite qualities. He died about three and a half years later. Before his death he was asked who should follow him as leader and replied, "Your *guru* is in the village of Bakāla." There were no less than twenty-two claimants to the guruship, all descendants of Hargobind, and it was not until three years later, in 1664, that Teg Bahādur was selected—a choice which was soon proved to have been a wise one.

TEG BAHĀDUR (A.D. 1621-1675)

Hargobind had predicted that his youngest son would in due course become *guru*. Teg Bahādur's life had been spent chiefly in religious devotion and during the time that attention had been centred upon finding a new *guru* he had lived in seclusion. It was only after much persuasion that he consented to occupy the office.

For several years he travelled about the country preaching and giving instructions to the people, becoming greatly respected and revered for his kindly ministrations and sanctity of life.

But Aurangzeb began to persecute the Hindus and Teg Bahādur determined that he must endeavour to free them from this grievous oppression. He decided to sacrifice his life in order that this purpose might be accomplished, and accordingly he instructed the Hindus to appeal to the Emperor against his cruelty and to tell him that if he could convert Teg Bahādur to Islam they also would embrace it.

The *guru* was brought to Aurangzeb, who tried by inducements and threats to prevail upon him to change his religion, but without avail. Instead he declared the excellences of the Sikh religion and entered into dispute about certain differences. This so enraged Aurangzeb that he said the *guru* must either accept Islam or be tortured and killed; to which Teg Bahādur replied that he was quite willing to suffer the sentence.



While in prison before his execution he gave instructions that his son Gobind Singh should succeed him.

GOBIND SINGH (A.D. 1666-1708)

Gobind Singh, the tenth and last of the *gurus*, who was only a boy of nine when his father Teg Bahādur died, was leader for thirty-three years.

He was a soldier and scholar, as well as a spiritual leader, and introduced several new elements into the life of the Sikh community.

The martyrdom of Teg Bahādur added a further stimulus to the development of military power, necessary for the preservation of the Sikhs themselves and of their religion, and this became progressively organized during the stormy events and wars of the period which followed. But it also led to an intensification of the religious and devotional activities which entered into every department of life.

The deeply religious character of Gobind Singh is indicated by his retirement for a period of divine worship and meditation in preparation for the introduction of what was probably the most important of his works, namely, the Institution of the Khālsa, which may be defined as "The Community of the Purified Ones".

After this period of devotional seclusion Gobind Singh called a great assembly from all parts of the country. He asked if any were willing to die for his faith. Five of them volunteered, and these were taken in turn into a tent. A blow was heard and then the *guru* came out alone on the first four occasions with a sword dripping with blood in his hand. The fifth time, however, he returned to the assembly with the five volunteers unharmed: the blood on the sword was that of a slaughtered goat.

The *guru* addressed them, saying he was now convinced that the community would be preserved and would fulfil its mission in the world.

He then administered the Baptism of the Sword to the five who had proved their faith in the religion and their allegiance to himself by submitting to such a severe test.

The ceremony consisted of the reading of parts of the *Granth*; the preparation of the *amrita*; its administration by the sprinkling of it upon their heads, and the recitation by the candidates

of: *Wāhguru ji ka Khālsa, Wāhguru ji ki fatab*—"The Khālsa of God, Victory to God." (This was afterwards used as a war cry.)

Instructions were then given them concerning the mode of life to which they must pledge themselves. This included the wearing of five articles—long hair, short breeches, a comb, a steel bracelet, and a double-edged sword; the recognition of the essential equality of all human beings and the abolition of caste prejudices, the abandonment of *suttee* and infanticide, and the rejection of the use of intoxicating liquors and tobacco.

Gobind then directed them to administer the Baptism of the Sword to him, after which he changed his name, which previously had been Gobind Rai, to Gobind Singh, and instructed them that in future all who received the Baptism should be called by the title Singh (Lion). He further told them that they had now entered into a new life, having taken upon themselves the service of the One God and of humanity, and therefore had become *gurus* like himself, with authority to administer the Baptism of the Sword.

As a symbol of their true brotherhood they then all ate and drank out of the same vessels.

The nucleus of the Khālsa was now established and soon thousands received baptism, thus rapidly extending its sphere of life and influence.

Entrance into the Khālsa was open to all who would conform to the requisite conditions, whatever their religion or caste.

From that time a new vital spirit infused the Sikhs, producing in them remarkable changes, elevating them spiritually, mentally, and physically; endowing them with a real self-respect and dignity, a steadfast devotion to duty, and a resolute fearlessness in the upholding and defence of right, even in the face of death.

During the subsequent years of Gobind's life the Khālsa became much involved in warfare and conducted itself with extreme courage and credit; and on the few occasions when it suffered defeat its spirit remained unconquered.

The *guru* died from the effects of a stab wound dastardly given while he was sleeping alone. Before his death he declared that the ten *gurus* had completed their appointed mission, and gave instructions that no personal *guru* should succeed him, but that in future the teachings recorded in the Holy *Granth* were to be

regarded as representing the *guru* and should be faithfully followed. Wherever five devout members of the Khāl̄sa were assembled, he said, the spirit of the *guru* would be present; and added:

“Recognize the Holy *Granth* as the manifested body of the *gurus*.

“Those whose mind is pure can find the *guru* in the hymns.”

The subsequent history of the Sikhs was marked by fluctuating periods of peacefulness and of subjection to great oppression. Perhaps no other religion has suffered from greater persecution during the first few hundred years of its existence. Its temples were destroyed or taken out of its possession, and thousands of its followers were killed. The houses of many were burnt and the homeless had to flee for their lives, driven from place to place. Upon the loss of a large number of its leaders, and the separation of its members, sects arose in the Khāl̄sa which often tended to produce discord, thus leading inevitably to a weakening and restriction of its activities.

After war with the British in the first half of the nineteenth century, in which the Sikhs at first had some success but later sustained defeat, they allied themselves to their conquerors and many joined the British army, of which they are among its finest troops, and have earned for themselves undying glory.

Although the life of the Sikh religion has greatly declined from its zenith, its noble tradition is recorded in the Holy Scripture of the *Granth Sahib* and in the hearts and minds of those who still adhere to its teachings and strive to apply them in their lives. A revival of its original inspiration may cause it to emerge from the obscure condition in which it at present exists, enabling it to take an honoured and useful place amongst the religions of the world.

(To be continued)

The quotations are from M. A. Macauliffe's *The Sikh Religion*, by kind permission of the Clarendon Press.

## THE DIVINE NAMES\*

BY DIONYSIUS THE AREOPAGITE

*Chapter XI (continued)*

But someone may say, "How can all things desire peace? For many things rejoice in difference and contrariety and would never willingly choose to be at rest." Now if it is said that this difference and contrariety is the identity of the existing being, and that nothing, while remaining in its natural state, wishes to lose it, we would not deny this, but would assert that even this is from a desire for peace. For all things love to have peace and to be united together and to retain their essential nature and their own properties without alteration or weakness. And the perfect Peace which is the Guardian of the pure identity of each one, by Its Providential gift of peace, preserves all things, both as a whole and individually without discord or confusion, and establishes all things by Its stable and unailing power in the possession of their own peace and rest.

And if all things which move desire not to be at rest, but always to perform their natural movements, even this is a desire for the Divine Universal Peace which keeps all things securely in their own places and preserves the individuality and living movement of all moving things unmoved and unailing. Thus the things which are moved, being at peace with themselves, act habitually according to their own nature.

But if, in saying that peace is not desired by all, he is thinking of that contrariety which is a falling away from peace, we must answer that there is no existing being which has entirely fallen away from all unity; for that which is utterly unstable, undefined, unfounded, and incoherent has no being of its own, nor is it in any existing things. But if he says that the things which rejoice in strife and anger and change and instability have an enmity against peace and the good gifts of peace, even these beings are governed by faint images of the desire for peace; for being troubled by the violent turmoil of their passions, and

\* For previous sections see *Shrine of Wisdom*, Nos. 96 to 107.

ignorantly desiring to calm them, they suppose that they will find peace by giving themselves up to fleeting pleasures, since they are so greatly disturbed when they fail to obtain those pleasures by which they are mastered.

What now should be said of the peaceful outpouring of the love of Christ to mankind? Through this we are taught no longer to make war against ourselves or against others or against the angels, but to co-operate with them, according to our power, in divine works in accordance with the Providence of Jesus Who worketh all in all and maketh peace unutterable and fore-ordained from all eternity, and reconcileth us to Himself and in Himself to the Father. But enough has been said of these super-natural gifts in the *Theological Outlines*, and the inspired word of the Scriptures gives additional testimony.

Now since you asked me in a letter what I mean by Being Itself, Life Itself, and Wisdom Itself, and said that you were perplexed because I sometimes called God Life Itself, and sometimes the Source of Life Itself, I thought it necessary, O holy man of God, to resolve this difficulty for you as far as I could.

In the first place, to repeat what I have said ten thousand times, there is no contradiction whatever between calling God Power Itself or Life Itself, and calling Him the Source of Life Itself or Peace or Power, since the former Names are derived from that which has being, and especially from the Primal Being as Cause of all that truly is; while the latter Names are given to Him as super-essentially transcending all, even the Primary Beings.

“But,” you will say, “what do we really mean when we speak of Being Itself or Life Itself or whatever is held to be absolute and ultimate and to be primal manifestations of God?” We answer that the matter is not intricate but straightforward, and has a simple explanation; for we say that the Self-subsistent Being, as Cause of the being of all things that are, is not a kind of Divine or angelic essence (for the Super-essential alone is the Source and Essence and Cause of the being of all things that are and of Being Itself), nor is It some life-giving deity other than the Super-Divine Which is the Cause of the life of all living beings and of Life Itself, nor, in short, is It any of the principles, beings, or creative essences and origins which men in their

ignorance have called gods and creators of the world. For, to speak truly and authoritatively, neither had they themselves such knowledge, nor their fathers, for there are no such beings. But our meaning is different, for Being Itself and Life Itself and Deity Itself are Names we give to the One Transcendent and Super-essential Origin and Cause of all things in Its Originative, Deific, and Causative Nature. But again, by reason of that which They impart, we call the Providential Powers Which come forth from the Imparticipable God the Self-essentiating, the Self-animating, and the Self-deifying Powers, for by participating in These in the measure of their capacity, all things are filled, and similarly with the other Names. Therefore God is said to be first, the Good Origin of the Primal Principles, then of the Whole, then of the parts, then of those Beings which participate wholly in Him, then of those which participate partially. But what need is there to speak further on this matter? For some of our holy teachers of Divine things call Him the Fount of Goodness Itself and Deity Itself, as being the Super-Good and Super-Divine Goodness Itself and Deity Itself. And they speak of Goodness Itself and Deity Itself as the beneficent and deifying Gift of God poured forth, and of Beauty Itself as the outpouring stream of Beautification Itself. And they speak of universal and particular beauty and of things wholly beautiful or partially beautiful, and similarly of all other attributes which can be used to symbolize the Providences and Goodnesses participated in by all beings and flowing forth from the Imparticipable God in that abundant and overflowing flood. Thus He Who is Cause of all is verily beyond them all, and He Who is Super-essential and Super-natural entirely transcends all things, whatever be their essence and nature.

*(To be concluded)*

## LIFE OF SYNESIUS

Synesius the Neo-Platonist and Christian bishop of Ptolemais lived during a period when the world was passing through what might justly be called a major crisis—that of the decay and final overthrow of the Roman Empire and its conquest by the barbaric Huns and Vandals. This might well have seemed the end of civilization to those who witnessed it, yet upon the ruins rose another structure which in turn was to exercise a world-wide influence, the foundation of which was a blending of the basic principles of the Neo-Platonic teachings with those of the Christian revelation.

Synesius was born at Cyrene, a Greek city of the Libyan Pentapolis or Cyrenaica. The date of his birth is uncertain, but it was probably between A.D. 365 and 370. His parents were wealthy people who claimed descent from the kings of Sparta, and from them he inherited an estate of moderate extent and sufficient means to follow his own inclinations. As a young man he served in the army, and of this period of his life little is known except that he was fond of all field sports. He must also have had a love of learning, for in A.D. 393, after he had left the army, he went with his brother Euoptus to study at the University of Alexandria, the chief seat of learning of the eastern empire. Here, under the guidance of the brilliant Neo-Platonist, Hypatia, Synesius studied the principles of that philosophy and became its devoted adherent. For the remainder of his life he corresponded with Hypatia on philosophical and scientific subjects, turned to her in his difficulties and, as his letters show, regarded her with reverence and devotion.

On completing his studies he returned to Cyrenaica and the country life which was the most congenial to him, but he also fulfilled his civic responsibilities and for a time served in the senate, giving as his reason: "The injuries done to my friends, both private individuals and soldiers, compel me to wish for a political office, though I know I am naturally unfitted for it." He found such corruption in the law-courts and so much oppression of the people by the government that he soon resigned his office. He defended this action in a letter to a friend:

"If circumstances gave free play to philosophy, no other science, nor all other sciences combined, would do so much for the harmonious arrangement of the government and the benefit of mankind. . . . I would rather my soul were guarded by virtue than my body with soldiers, now that conditions no longer allow a statesman to be a ruler."

Synesius was a man of wide sympathies, proved integrity, and great eloquence, and in the year 397 he was chosen as representative of all the cities of the Pentapolis to lead an embassy to the court of the Emperor Arcadius at Constantinople to make known the pitiable condition of his country, caused by the greed of its governor and the inefficiency of its army, and to ask for some remission of the heavy taxes.

It was through his friendship with Aurelian, one of the leading statesmen at Constantinople, that after three stormy years, during which there was an insurrection, Synesius was able to carry out his mission in spite of opposition. Through Aurelian also he gained permission to give an oration in the year 398 before the emperor and his court on the nature and duties of rulership.

The political and moral corruption in Constantinople horrified Synesius who denounced it in this speech. The oration, which has been preserved, is based largely on the teachings of Plato. It begins with the statement that the words should be received not as coming from the envoy of a small state, but as the teachings of philosophy. The requisites for rulership are next given. The first is that "the foundations of a kingly character should be laid in piety", for kingly power on earth was ordained as representing Divine Providence. The second requisite is that the ruler should practise justice and benevolence. The governors serving under him are to be appointed for their virtue, not on account of their wealth. Finally it is desirable that the king be a lover of philosophy, since human affairs progress or decline as this is present or absent.

While at Constantinople Synesius wrote the treatise *On Providence*, the first part of which was published early in the year 400, and the second part later in the same year. When at last his mission had succeeded, he returned to his country home where his time was spent happily in study and in open-air pursuits. His friends in Lybia did not share his literary and



philosophical tastes. "I never hear in Lybia the sound of philosophy except the echo of my own voice," he writes, "yet if no one else is my witness, assuredly God is, for the mind of man is the seed of God." He exchanged letters with many friends, but correspondence was no easy matter: letters had to be sent by the hand of some reliable traveller to the city concerned or to one whence they could be forwarded by a similar channel. Sometimes a letter might be a year upon its way. In winter Constantinople was entirely cut off, and the voyage was dangerous at all times. "Hence it is not surprising", says one writer,\* "that many letters were studied productions written in the knowledge that they would be widely read and criticized."

With his great ability and receptive mind, Synesius was open to the influence of the highest ideals in whatever field they were encountered. He had a deep love of Greek literature, but his chief gifts were those of observation and re-expression rather than original thought. His writings taken together reflect the religious and political events of his time in a manner achieved by none of his contemporaries.

His letters reveal him as a man of strongly philosophical and religious bent, honourable and upright in his dealings with others, interested in all branches of literature, fond of country pursuits, especially the chase and horticulture, energetic in all that he undertook, a man of many gifts, a witty companion, affectionate, kind, and sensitive, ready to help those in distress and to appeal against injustice.

In 402 his friends persuaded him to visit the University of Athens, the leading school of the Roman empire, but he was disappointed both with the teachers and the city, and soon returned.

Since the death of Theodosius the Great, the rich provinces of the Roman empire had been subject to invasion from all sides. The frontier defences were weak, and Lybia, like other provinces, suffered increasingly frequent and devastating raids. Roman citizens were not encouraged to undergo military training, and foreigners were employed who were equally likely to desert when hard pressed or to sell themselves to the enemy. Synesius, while in the senate, had strongly but fruitlessly urged the formation of a national army, and had advised that the

\* T. R. Halcombe.

military commander should be under the governor of Egypt instead of the governor of Constantinople, because of the difficulty of communication. In Cyrene there were no trained forces to oppose the invaders. Synesius took his part in organizing the defence and in the fighting. In a letter he wrote: "Blessings on the priests of the Auxiditae who when the soldiers hid themselves in the caves, called the people together and after divine service took the offensive against the enemy." In another letter he said: "The enemy have burnt the barns and devastated the land and carried off the women as slaves. The males they never spare. Yet we sit at home, hoping in vain for the soldiers. Shall we not cease our folly? Shall we not march against these men on behalf of our children, our wives, our country? For my part I have levied a troop among our neighbours." To his "most venerated teacher", Hypatia, he wrote, "I see the enemy in arms and men slaughtered like sheep."

A short time afterwards sufficient help was received to drive out the invaders for the time being and in 403 Synesius went to Alexandria where he married and stayed for two years. His wife was a Christian, and no doubt long before this time he had recognized the essential harmony between the Christian ideals and his own philosophical principles.

On his return with his wife to Cyrenaica he found a new governor in office whom he described as "oppressive in peace and useless in war". A class of people had arisen, known as "informers", who would accuse rich men of imaginary crimes, whereupon their property would be confiscated and the proceeds divided between the governor and the informer. The taxes levied by the central government were so high that no local governor could raise them except by tyrannical or unlawful extortion.

The new governor accepted payment from soldiers belonging to the district in return for leave of absence, provided that they maintained themselves, and with his foreign soldiers he visited in turn the richer cities where the troops plundered the people until the authorities readily paid money to be rid of them.

Taking advantage of this state of affairs, the enemy again invaded the country, seizing the crops and cattle, while the governor retreated to a ship in the bay and sent orders that the enemy was not to be attacked. Synesius wrote, "I am busy

devising a machine which shall hurl large stones a considerable distance from the walls." And again, "At break of day I ride out as far as possible to gain tidings of these brigands. . . . At night with a body of young men, I make circuits round the hill that the women may sleep without fear. . . . I want a few men who do not belie the name of men. If I get them, with the help of God, I am confident of success. But if I must die, there is this benefit in philosophy, that I should not shrink from leaving this 'little bag of flesh'; but that I shall shed no tear at the thought of my wife and child, that I cannot pledge myself to do." Again help was received; a new governor was appointed, troops arrived, and the enemy was driven off.

About five years after his marriage he was baptized into the Christian church by his good friend Theophilus, Archbishop of Alexandria. Synesius had never in his writings shown any antipathy to Christianity. From one of his hymns in which he refers to his embassy to Constantinople, it appears that he had found no hindrance in worshipping in a Christian church. "To all Thy temples, Lord, built for Thy holy rites I went, and prostrate as a suppliant, bathed with my tears the pavement. That my journey might not be in vain I prayed to all the Gods, Thy Ministers, Whom Thou hast crowned with angelic rays, Thy Holy Servants."\* The temples referred to were Christian churches, for all other temples had for some years been closed by imperial edict.

Synesius offered in his own person an example of the harmonious manner in which the fundamental truths of Neo-Platonism could interpenetrate the Christian teachings. He was at one with the leaders of the Church in distinguishing carefully between the philosophical and theological truths which might be given out to people in general and those which should only be imparted to minds fitted by previous training to discover their significance, since they would but be degraded and corrupted by those unfitted to receive them. "It is, I think," he said, "an ancient and thoroughly Platonic custom to conceal the great truths of philosophy under the form of some less important subject, so that what has been discovered with difficulty may neither be lost to mankind nor defiled by being exposed to the profane or vulgar." Synesius even avoided the discussion of

\* Translated by Holcombe.

abstruse philosophical matters in letters, lest they should be read by undiscerning persons. To him Proteus was the symbol of the true philosopher eluding vulgar curiosity by concealing under earthly forms that which is divine, and only revealing it to the persistent efforts of heroic men. Philosophy, he said, "is the most ineffable of all ineffable subjects." In agreement with this view Theodorus the archbishop said, "We speak of the Divine Mysteries in obscure language because of the uninitiated (the unbaptized) but when they are gone, we instruct the initiated plainly."

A short time after the baptism of Synesius a new governor of Cyrenaica was appointed, a native of the province, a man of degraded character who had secured the office by bribery in defiance of the law prohibiting any native of a state from becoming its governor—a measure designed to prevent favouritism and bias. Synesius wrote to an influential friend in Constantinople, "Send us legitimate governors—men who will not be biased in their judgment by their private feelings . . . a governor is on his way to us who lately took a hostile part in politics here and who will pursue his political differences on the judgment seat. . . . I have seen a man thrown into prison because he would not accuse the excellent governor, who lately resigned, of embezzling the public funds."

At this time the people of the province, well aware of his high ideals, his integrity of character, courage, executive power, and the many services already rendered to them, elected Synesius as their bishop. Their choice was approved by Theophilus but Synesius himself felt deeply his own unworthiness for the work. In a letter to his brother Euoptus he wrote, "I should be devoid of feeling if I were not deeply grateful to the people of Ptolemais who have thought me worthy of higher honours than I do myself.

"That a mere man should receive almost divine honours is indeed most pleasing, if he is worthy of them, but if he is far from being so, his acceptance of them gives but a poor hope for the future. This is no new fear, but one I have long felt—the fear lest I should gain honour among men by sinning against God.

"From my knowledge of myself I feel I am in every respect

unworthy of the episcopal office." He pointed out that in his present life, he secluded himself when studying, but in his amusements was thoroughly sociable, while a bishop, on the contrary, was not expected to engage at all in amusements, but in religious matters was expected to be sociable—to teach and preach the law, and in addition to do the work of everybody and bear the blame of everybody.

Some of the notions popularly taught and held about theology among the Christians were unacceptable to Synesius. To a friend he wrote, "You know that philosophy is opposed to the opinions of the multitude. I certainly shall not admit that the soul is posterior in existence to the body. I cannot agree that the world and all its parts will perish together. The resurrection\* which is so much talked about I consider something sacred and ineffable, and I am far from sharing the opinions of the multitude on the subject. . . . The truth of Divine Mysteries is not a thing to be talked about in public. But if I am called to the bishopric I do not think it right to pretend to hold opinions that I do not hold. I call God and man as witnesses to this. Truth is the attribute of God before Whom I wish to be entirely blameless.

"Though I am fond of amusements, still I will consent to give them up . . . though I shall regret to see my darling dogs no longer allowed to hunt. I will endure the petty matters of business as rendering my appointed service to God, grievous as it will be. But I will have no deceit about dogmas, nor shall there be variance between my thoughts and my tongue. It shall never be said of me that I got myself consecrated without my opinions being known. But let Father Theophilus, dearly beloved of God, decide for me with full knowledge of the circumstances of the case, and let him tell me his opinion clearly."

For several months Synesius refused to undertake the office. He visited Theophilus at Alexandria to consult with him, and the people of Ptolemais sent a deputation to the archbishop, urging him to persuade Synesius to accept the bishopric. So great was the popular demand for his appointment that, had he refused, Synesius could hardly have returned to Pentapolis. Finally in 410 he accepted the charge. To his presbyters he

\* The literal resurrection of the physical body.

wrote, "Since God has laid upon me not what I sought, but what He willed, I pray that He Who has assigned me this life will guide me through the life He has assigned me. How shall I who have spent my youth in philosophical leisure and contemplation, I who have only meddled with the cares of life so far as was necessary for me to discharge my duties as a private person and a citizen, how shall I be able to bear the continued pressure of anxiety? How shall I, while devoting myself to a multitude of affairs, still turn to those intellectual beauties which are only enjoyed in happy leisure, without which life is no life to me and to such as I am? I know not. But to God, it is said, all things are possible, even the impossible. Do you then lift up your hands in prayer for me to God and exhort the people in the city and those who frequent the churches in the villages and in the country to pray both in public and private for me. If I am not abandoned by God, I shall realize that the episcopacy is not a descent from philosophy, but an ascent to a higher form of it."

After his consecration he wrote little more and had little time for philosophical studies. His life was spent in the service of the Church and his people.

*(To be continued)*

## SEED THOUGHT

Venerate God in love and in respect. Then He will answer thee in thy inward spiritual practice. Be gentle and humble of heart; then the Spirit of God rests in thy soul. Be friendly, zealous, and kind to everyone who needs thee. Be sober in food and drink and in everything thou needest; then thou wilt live without sorrow or anxiety for thyself. Watch thyself and all thy weaknesses, judge thyself inwardly and outwardly in the sight of Truth which is God, but judge no one else who has not been recommended to thee; then thou wilt live without thorns, wrath and vengeance in thy heart and find peace in thyself and grace in God.

—*Ruysbroeck.*

## THE ELEMENTS OF THEOLOGY\*

PROCLUS

Proposition CCI

*All divine souls have triple energies; some indeed as souls; others as receiving a Divine intellect; and others as suspended from the Gods. And they provide for the whole of things as Gods; but they know all things through an intellectual life; and they move bodies through a self-moved hyparxis*

For because they psychically participate of the natures situated above them, and are not simply souls, but divine souls, and are established according to an order, in the psychical extent, analogous to the Gods, they energize not only psychically but also divinely, being allotted a deified summit of their essence, and also because they have an intellectual hypostasis, through which they are placed under intellectual essences. Hence, they not only energize divinely, but also intellectually; the former indeed according to *the one* which they contain, but the latter through an energy established according to intellect. A third energy, likewise, is present with them, according to their own hyparxis, which is motive indeed of things naturally alter-motive, but is vivific of such as possess an adventitious life. For this is the proper employment of every soul; but such energies as are intellectual and providential, they possess according to participation.

Proposition CCII

*All souls attending upon and always following the Gods, are inferior to divine, but are expanded above partial souls*

For divine souls participate both of Intellect and Deity, on which account they are at the same time intellectual and divine, and are the leaders of other souls, even as the Gods also are Leaders of all beings. But partial souls are deprived of a direct

\* For previous sections, see *Shrine of Wisdom*, Nos. 65 to 107.

suspension from intellect, in consequence of not being able to participate proximately of an intellectual essence: for they would not fall from intellectual energy if they essentially participated of intellect, as has been before demonstrated (in Proposition 184). Hence, the souls which always follow the Gods are of a middle condition; receiving indeed a perfect intellect, and through this surpassing partial souls, yet not being suspended from the Divine Unities: for the intellect which they participate is not divine.

Proposition CCIII

*Of every psychical multitude, divine souls indeed being greater in power than other souls, are less in number. But those that always follow divine souls have a middle order among all souls, both in power and quantity. And partial souls indeed are inferior in power to the others, but proceed into a greater number.*

For divine souls are more allied to *the One*, on account of their Hyparxis being Divine; but souls of an intermediate rank through the participation of intellect; and those of the last order are essentially dissimilar both to those of the middle, and those of the first rank. Among perpetual natures, however, those that are nearer *the One*, are more single in number, and more contracted in multitude, than such as are more remote from It. But such as are more remote from *the One*, are more multiplied. The powers, therefore, of superior souls are greater, and have the same ratio to those of souls in the second rank, which the divine has to the intellectual, and the intellectual to the psychical peculiarity. Inferior souls also are more in number. For that which is more remote from *the One*, is a greater, and that which is nearer to It, is a less multitude.

*(To be continued)*