

Prof. Noel Q. King
Curtain Falls Over an Era

(A Tribute by Dr. Balwant Singh Dhillon, Director Centre for Guru Nanak Studies, Guru Nanak Dev University, Amritsar , Punjab India.)

When on Feb 2, 2009, I heard the news of Prof. Noel Q. King's death I could not control my emotions. It took sometime for me to recompose myself. My wife consoled me because it was expected and inevitable due to the growth of cancerous cells in his stomach. We felt that someone very close to us has departed from us forever.

I came into contact with Prof. King in Delhi in late 1992 when he was on a visit to attend an international conference on Sikh Studies. We had a brief interaction during the tea break and instantly developed liking for each another. In early 1993, on my request, he agreed to visit the Department of Guru Nanak Studies, Guru Nanak Dev University, Amritsar as a Visiting Professor. The lectures that he delivered on the research methodology for the Study of Religion were very much liked by the students and faculty as well. He impressed every one with the knowledge and understanding that he possessed about the world religions. He conducted himself with dignity, humility and won the hearts with his amiable manners within and outside the university. He was an academic par excellence but also gave due space to the tradition as well. He used to call his study of the religions as **A Pilgrimage into the World Religions**. He was of the opinion that for a full and comprehensive study of any religion besides the academic settings, one needs to go into the heart of a religion and it can be possible only through the due appreciation of traditional understanding that had been handed out from one generation to another. Besides the modern methods, he laid equal stress upon the knowledge of traditional scholarship. He advised the Sikh scholars to master these two disciplines in order to confront the academic issues that have cropped up in the Sikh Studies. He respected the tradition, but at the same he did not allow it to influence his writings.

Prof. King's knowledge and experience of the world religions were marvelous. He was a great scholar who had understood Sikhism in its true sense. Listening to him really was a treat, a God-given opportunity. He loved the Punjab, the land of five rivers and the land of his birth. He conducted himself like any Punjabi and admired the Sikhs from the core of his heart. In Sep. 1995 he came all the way from California to participate in the World Sikh Samelan in Amritsar. The highest Sikh body Sri Akal Takht Sahib and Shrimani Gurdwara Parbandhak Committee (SGPC) at Amritsar honored Dr. King for his academic services to Sikhism that he had rendered in the tradition of J. D. Cunningham and M. A. Macauliffe. I had the opportunity to have long academic discussions with him on various issues of Sikh Studies. He took a keen interest in my academic career. He instructed me to hone the skills in the area of textual studies in order to put forth my viewpoint regarding the debate over the authenticity of the Sikh Scripture. He was candid enough to admit that unlike the other big names in the field of Religious Studies he had not build any academic empire to dole out fellowships to his favored students. But at the same time he was always helpful and ordered latest books for me which met my immediate requirements. He was gracious enough to write the foreword of my book,

Early Sikh Scriptural Tradition: Myth and Reality, for which I will remain ever indebted to him. In July 2003, when I was in England and was looking into the 18th century British writings on the Sikhs, Prof. King rescheduled his visit to England in such a way that he may be helpful to me in my academic research. His wife, Laurie drove us to Oxford University and I vividly remember visiting their Oxford house. At that time Prof. King took me to Christ Church College and other institutions and explained to me their history and academic activities. In 2006 Prof. King asked Dr. Craig Noll (ed.), **The Encyclopaedia of Christianity** to approach me to prepare a new article on the 'Sikhs' which earlier had appeared in the name of Prof. King. I did it dutifully with a request that Prof. King's name should be retained as a co-author.

In June 1994, I had the privilege to stay with Prof. King and his family in their countryside home in Watsonville. Later on in May 2000, 2004 and in Oct. 2006, I had the honor to visit him at his home in Santa Cruz hills. He always greeted me and my friends in front of his house reminding me how eagerly he was awaiting us. The love and affection he showered upon me is indescribable, it is an unforgettable experience which I cherish in my heart. I enjoyed every bit of his hospitality and outpouring love. In 2006 while saying good-bye to me he whispered to me in low voice that perhaps I will not see his face again. Both of us got little bit emotional, tears rolled down our cheeks and after a few minutes I assured him, God Willing we will meet again. Perhaps he was aware of the divine call that may come any time. From the email messages that I continued to receive from him, I felt he was mentally prepared for his next journey. In 2008 he was looking forward to my visit to California and was eagerly awaiting it, but unfortunately it did not materialize. He has left for his heavenly journey without meeting me one more time which is a great emotional shock for me.

Prof. King used to travel a lot every year. Since 1993, he was a regular visitor to Guru Nanak Dev University Amritsar. After visiting his friends, relatives and colleagues in England, Australia and other countries, he used to visit India and Pakistan. Usually he would reach Amritsar in late October and after staying for a month or so would leave to celebrate Christmas with his wife and children in California. Before leaving Amritsar he used to celebrate his birthday by hosting a tea party to the students and faculty of the Department of Guru Nanak Studies. Like his earlier work on Ibn Batuta in Black Africa, Dr. King desired to work on the travels of Ibn Batuta in Indian sub-continent. For that purpose he had traveled extensively in Pakistan. In search of a possible route of Ibn Batuta in India he traveled with me to different places such as Faridkot, Bathinda, Abohar, Bhatner, Sirsa etc. He had a great fascination towards the Indus Valley Civilization (his birthplace) and traveled with me all the way from Ropar in Punjab to Kali Banga in Rajasthan in order to have first hand information on these sites. He was pained to see the fast disappearing Jaina temples in Pakistan and lamented over the apathy of Jaina community because they were not paying due attention to documenting their shrines in Pakistan.

Since 1993 Prof. King was an Adjunct Professor at Guru Nanak Dev University, Amritsar and had the rare honor to deliver a lecture to the Faculty and the students on the foundation day of the University on 24th Nov. 2004. Whenever he visited Amritsar,

University offered him to stay in its guest house but he preferred to stay in our house. We always treated him as a fatherly figure. He was so much loved by my wife and sons Samrat and Shahbaz that they took pleasure in sitting down with him next to the computer every evening to send email messages to his contacts dictated by him. He named his room in our house the Prophet's Chamber. Once he wrote back to his wife that he is living in Amritsar as an honorable member of the Dhillon Jat Sikh clan. He savored Punjabi food especially the Amritsari Fish, Sarson da Saag (a dish made of mustard greens), Samosa, Jalebi, Gulab Jamun etc. His picture along with me still hangs in our drawing room. It gives us the feeling that he is ever present with us.

Dr. King was a great friend of the Sikhs and desired that Sikh Studies should get equal importance in the curriculum in North America. He was ready to help in this matter but the persons at the helm of affairs preferred to look the other way. He was a rare breed of scholars, an uncommon personality which is difficult to find in these days. With his passing away a void has occurred in the field of Sikh Studies which is difficult to fill, but the ideals that Dr. King pursued will continue to beacon up and inspire the young Sikh scholars. His death is a personal loss to those who came into contact with him. He was a bridge between the tradition and modernity. With him a legend has passed into eternity. May God rest his soul in peace.