

INTRODUCTION TO SIKHISM

Sikhism, one of the world's youngest religions, was founded only 500 years ago. It is a monotheistic religion that originated in the Indian province of Punjab (now part of the undivided Punjab which includes part of present-day Pakistan and portions of Afghanistan). The founder of Sikhism, Guru Nanak, was born in 1469. For many years he traveled as a seeker of truth, visiting many Hindu religious sites, as well as Mecca and Medina.

Coming from a region that had been historically Hindu, but was subjected to Islamic rule at the time of his birth, Nanak sought peace by combining the values of Hinduism and Islam. At the age of 38, Guru Nanak had a revelatory experience and began to teach his direct revelation in the form of hymns. These hymns are still cherished and sung in the Sikh community. They teach that religion consists in being mindful of God, meditating on God's name, and reflecting God in one's life. Guru Nanak traveled throughout the Arab world, attracting both Hindu and Muslim followers. They became known as Sikhs, from the Sanskrit word *shishya* meaning "disciple".

Nanak and each of the nine Gurus who followed him selected their own successor while alive. Gobind Singh, who died in 1708, was the last living Guru. He pronounced the end of the lineage of Gurus in a physical body, and vested final authority in the Sikh community and in the Scriptures, which are called *Guru Granth Sahib*.

BELIEFS

The Mool Mantra, which begins the *Guru Granth Sahib*, outlines the beliefs of Sikhs:

There is One God.
He
Is Supreme Truth
Is without fear
Is Timeless, Eternal
Is not born, so
He does not die to be reborn.
Self-illuminated,
By Guru's grace
He is revealed to the human soul.
Truth was in the beginning,
and throughout the ages.
Truth is now and ever will be.

Guru Nanak accepted some traditional beliefs of Hinduism, such as the cyclical nature of time (the earth endures endless cycles of creation and destruction), and reincarnation. "Haumai," or self-centeredness, caused by greed, lust, pride, anger and attachment to the passing things of earthly life, is believed by Sikhs to be the source of all evil. It is this self-centeredness that produces *karma* and the endless cycles of rebirth.

Sikhs believe that the purpose of human life is to experience spiritual union with the Divine – "to merge with Ultimate Reality like a drop of water merges with the ocean and becomes one with it", rather than to attain salvation or a heavenly abode like Paradise. This union with God is enlightenment – release from reincarnation, and any person can attain it.

Sikhism believes in full participation in human life, work and family. Responsibility in these areas is a way to serve and seek God. Sikhs understand God to be both immanent and transcendent, encouraging each individual to aspire to become God-like while living.

Sikhism believes in the equality of all persons regardless of gender. Guru Gobind Singh, the tenth guru, declared that all followers should change their last names: Singh (or lion) for men, and Kaur (or princess) for women, indicating universal equality.

SACRED BOOKS/SCRIPTURES

The Guru Granth Sahib is the central scripture of Sikhs and is enthroned as the current living guru for the community. It is at the heart of Sikh worship and lends sacredness to the *gurdwara* or temple. Sikhs bow before the Guru Granth Sahib and pray in its presence. It has undergone developmental changes since the time of Guru Nanak, but received its distinctive form under the fifth Guru, Arjan. In addition to the teaching of several gurus, it also contains Hindu and Muslim hymns, and is written in rhyming couplets. It was composed in Sanskrit, Persian, Hindi and Punjabi. It is printed in "Gurmukhi" script, which is an alphabet adapted for the Punjabi language. The Guru Granth Sahib now consists of 1,430 standardized pages. Also an important text, and published in 1945, the "Rehat Maryada" (or Sikh Code of Conduct) regulates individual and corporate Sikh life.

PRACTICES, RITUALS and CELEBRATIONS

Sikh practices include dress, life cycle rituals, festivals, the *langar* meal, and worship in the temple.

At puberty, some Sikhs go through an initiation, called the *Amrit*, which originated with the last living guru in 1699. The initiate makes a promise to follow the Sikh code of conduct and then becomes *Khalsa*, belonging to God, or "pure". He or she vows to:

- Abstain from the use of alcohol, other intoxicants or tobacco
- Never to cut the hair on any part of the body
- Not to eat the meat of sacrificial or ritual animals
- To refrain from any sexual contact outside marriage
- To wear the five symbols (often called the five K's) of Sikhs.

All Sikhs, whether Khalsa or not, are enjoined to pray daily, to tithe time and income to the community, and to live a moral life of service and humility. The five symbols, or five K's are:

1. Kesh: not to cut the hair (men wear a turban over theirs) – surrender to the will of God.
2. Kanga: a comb is to be carried within the hair – to clean the hair.
3. Karra: an iron bracelet is worn – to experience oneself as a slave to the will of the prophets.
4. Kirpan: a kirpan or steel dagger is worn – symbol to fight against evil in oneself and in society through lawful means.
5. Kacherra: a specific knee-length undergarment is worn – symbol of chastity.

Sikhism has neither monks nor nuns, and both lay people and the “clergymen” or *granthi* are encouraged to marry. Most *granthi*, those who recite the Guru Granth Sahib, are male, but women who are Khalsa also may publicly recite from the scriptures. The term has no gender associated with it. There is no ecclesiastical hierarchy – all Sikh congregations are autonomous.

Sikh gatherings consist of singing passages of the Guru Granth Sahib, some teaching based on a passage delivered by the *granthi*, prayer and the congregational meal or *langar*. All the festivals celebrated by Sikhs include men and women, hymn singing, lectures, consecrated food, and food for the congregation. Sikhism is basically anti-ritualistic, so only simple rites and ceremonies are observed. Life cycle rituals observed by Sikhs include naming, baptism, marriage and funeral rites. Sikhs celebrate many festivals, but five are observed universally:

Birthday of Guru Nanak. Observed in October/November.

Birthday of Guru Gobind.
Celebrated on December 22.

Installation of the Guru Granth Sahib as Guru.
Celebrated in September/October, this festival commemorates the date in 1604 when the sacred book was installed as guru for the community at the Golden Temple in Amritsar.

Vaisakhi (the New Year). Celebration is on April 13, the date the Khalsa order was founded by Guru Gobind in 1699. Also celebrated is the first annual gathering of Sikhs at the center of pilgrimage, Goindwal, which took place during Guru Amar Das' Guruship (1552-1574).

Diwali. Similar to the Hindu festival of light, this celebration also commemorates the return of the sixth Guru, Har Gobind (1606-1644) to the holy city of Amritsar after his release from prison. Celebrated in October/November.

AMERICAN SIKHS

While there are no denominations in Sikhism, in the United States there is a grouping of Sikhs along cultural and language lines. This group, originating in the 1960s, is called American Sikhs and is distinguishable from other Sikhs by their mode of dress, which is all white, and they follow a strict vegetarian diet and set times of worship. Women as well as men also wear turbans. Their leader is Yogi Harbhajan Singh and they call themselves 3HO (Healthy, Happy, Holy Organization). They know only a limited amount of Punjabi. Sikhs of Indian origin and American Sikhs also share some basic beliefs and practices, visit one another's gurdwaras and are mutually accepting.

THE ROLES OF WOMEN

The Gurus of Sikhism were among the first men in the modern world to encourage freedom and full status and participation for women. In keeping with the Sikh commitment to equality, men and women are expected to preserve their spiritual and social independence and identity from one another. There is no mediator between each individual and God – that relationship is personal and direct. ☞

SIKHISM – Did you know?

- The symbol most often associated with Sikhism is called the Khanda. It is composed of five parts, which have been interpreted to symbolize the unity of God, God's concern for justice and truth, and God's spiritual power.
- Sikh young people who have been initiated, and are therefore observant of the five K's, have been allowed by the Ninth Circuit Court of Appeals to carry their *kirpan*, the steel dagger, to school under certain conditions. Although all public schools must adhere to a “no weapons” policy, Sikh youth may wear the kirpan so long as it is sewn or bolted into the sheath so that it cannot be removed. In some of these cases it is also worn beneath the clothing.
- Sikhs were among the Asian groups denied the right to immigrate to the U.S in 1926. However, Sikh immigration returned in 1965, when immigration law was relaxed.
- The estimated number of Sikhs in the U.S. is about 400,000.
- One of the largest populations of Sikhs in the world is in Fremont, California.