



Common Questions About Sikhism

The Basics:

➤ ***What is Sikhism?***

Sikhism is a monotheistic religion based on a definitive revelation. With over 25 million followers worldwide, Sikhism is one of the youngest major world religions. Sikhism was revealed to Guru Nanak over 500 years ago in the Punjab, the Sikh Homeland in South Asia. Sikhism preaches a message of devotion, remembrance of God at all times, truthful living, equality between all human beings and social justice, while emphatically denouncing superstitions and blind rituals.

➤ ***Is Sikh pronounced SEEK?***

The correct pronunciation is “siKH”, and not “sEEK”. The latter is a mispronunciation.

➤ ***How many Sikhs are there worldwide?***

Sikhism is one of the world’s youngest religions, but is the fifth largest religion in the world with over 25 million followers.

Beliefs:

➤ ***Is Sikhism a blend of Islam and Hinduism or a sect of Hinduism?***

It is only due to a shared geographic culture that some ideas or methods of these different religions may seem similar. Sikhism is in fact a unique revealed religion. It is not derived from any other religion. It is not a blend of any two or three religions. Guru Nanak started a new faith.

The uniqueness of the Sikh faith is immediately apparent if you understand the main philosophies and practices of the Sikhs. In fact Sikhism questions, challenges and rejects many of the practices of Hinduism and Islam. For example, according to Sikh teachings, all people are created equal regardless of gender, status, geographic location, and religion affiliation. Sikhs strive to achieve a balance between spiritual life and temporal life. Sikhism condemns empty rituals. Sikhs do not believe in pilgrimages, idolatry or reverence to pictures. Sikhs believe in practices such as daily prayer that instill understanding and discipline.

➤ ***What does Sikhism teach about other religions?***

The Sikh scripture, the Guru Granth Sahib, is the only major religious text which contains writings by teachers of other faiths. This is because the Sikh Gurus taught that there are many different ways of achieving a connection with the God. The Sikh way is one of

these ways. If you are following the Sikh way, you must follow it to the best of your abilities, and with absolute devotion.

➤ ***Does Sikhism preach conversion?***

No. Sikhism forbids proselytization or forced conversions. Sikhism believes that there are many paths to God. That said, Sikhism welcomes anyone interested in learning about the religion. Thus, people might learn about Sikh faith and then even be baptized as Sikhs. There are Chinese Sikhs, African Sikhs etc. However, once someone is baptized and initiated as a Sikh, she or he must follow the Sikh path to the best of her or his ability.

➤ ***Do Sikhs believe in an after life? Do they believe in Heaven/Hell, salvation?***

Sikhs' focus is on this lifetime. The Sikh Scripture asks Sikhs to make the best of their time on this earth, for this is one's opportunity to accomplish her or his best and to make a connection with Waheguru—the One, Omnipotent Power. Sikhs are asked not to partake in rituals and superstitions and not to concentrate on what occurred before birth or after death. Sikh scripture repudiates a belief in a physical place called Heaven or Hell. Similarly, Sikhism rejects the notion of a Judgment Day.

Articles of Faith:

➤ ***What are the Sikh Articles of Faith?***

Sikhs wear an external uniform to unify and bind them to the beliefs of the religion and to remind them of their commitment to the Sikh faith at all times. Unlike other faiths where only the clergy are in uniform, all Sikhs are enjoined to wear the uniform of their beliefs. These five articles of faith, along with a turban, distinguish a Sikh and have deep spiritual significance for Sikhs. The five articles of faith start with the "k" alphabet in Punjabi, and are thereby referred to as the 5 K's. They are:

1. Kes (uncut hair)
2. Kangha (comb)
3. Kara (steel bracelet)
4. Kirpan (sword)
5. Kaccha (soldier's shorts)

➤ ***Why don't Sikhs cut or shave their hair?***

Guru Nanak, the founder of the Sikh faith, started the practice of keeping hair unshorn. Guru Gobind Singh, the tenth Sikh Guru, gave the Sikh nation articles of faith (including uncut hair), which as a whole comprise the daily uniform of a Sikh. Many Sikh scholars and theologians have interpreted meanings for each of the articles of faith; as many Sikhs have also reflected on the teachings of the Gurus and inferred their own reasons.

➤ ***Why do Sikhs wear turbans?***

The turban is part of the uniform because it has immense spiritual and temporal significance. Wearing a turban declares sovereignty, dedication, self-respect, courage and piety. All practicing Sikhs wear the turban out of love and as a mark of commitment to the faith.

➤ ***What is under the turban?***

Sikhs keep their hair unshorn and tie them in a bun on top of their head. Sikhs tie turbans to cover this top knot.

➤ ***Do women wear turbans?***

Just like Sikh men, Sikh women are not supposed to cut their hair. They are also required to cover their heads. Many Sikh women do so with a scarf. Others tie a turban. For Sikh women who tie a turban, the turban is just as much a part of their body and identity as it is for Sikh men! Culturally, many Sikh women do not cover their heads, but this is like in every religion—cultures and trends influence how closely people follow religion.

➤ ***How is a Sikh turban different from an Arab turban?***

Sikhism is the only religion in the world which *requires* its followers to tie a turban. The Sikh turban is thus an article of faith. People of many other cultures and religions wear turbans, but none are required to do so by their religion. Arabs wear turbans, people in the Indian dessert state of Rajasthan wear turbans, Africans wear turbans—but none of these people are ‘required’ to wear their turbans.

Sikh turbans may be of different colors, styles and types but are not hats. Sikhs tie their turbans anew each day. Asking a Sikh to take off his turban in say a fancy club or church is like asking a person to remove his pants. Sikh turbans become a part of a Sikh’s body and are usually removed only in the privacy of the house.

➤ ***Do women shave?***

Sikhs are not supposed to cut hair from any part of their body. All Sikhs are thus supposed to have unshorn hair, and Sikh women are to maintain a separate identity and not shave. But, living in the present-day, many succumb to the societal pressure and do shave.

➤ ***How about people with cut hair who identify themselves as Sikh?***

All Sikhs are supposed to have uncut/untrimmed hair. But like in every religion, there are people who closely follow the religion and others who stray due to different pressures. Some people may cut their hair, but that does not exclude them from the Sikh community. However, the Sikh religion very clearly dictates that we are not supposed to cut or shave our hair.

➤ ***What are Kirpans?***

The Kirpan is a religious sword that encapsulates an initiated Sikh's solemn obligation of courage and self-defense. It denotes dignity and self-reliance, the capacity and readiness to always defend the weak and the oppressed. It helps sustain one's martial spirit and the determination to sacrifice oneself in order to defend truth, oppression and Sikh moral values. All Initiated Sikhs are mandated to wear a Kirpan on their body at all times.

➤ ***What is that bracelet?***

The bracelet is a “Kara,” and is generally made out of steel. The Kara is one of the mandatory Sikh articles of faith, meant to be worn by a Sikh at all times.

➤ ***What is the Kanga (comb)?***

Sikhs carry a small comb, called the Kanga. It can be worn easily in the hair at all times and is a symbol of cleanliness. Just as a comb helps to remove the tangles and cleans the hair, the Kanga is a spiritual reminder to shed impurities of thought.

➤ ***What is the Kachha (under shorts)?***

A special, slightly longer type of shorts, the Kachha is linked to a high moral character and must be worn at all times. It reminds the Sikh of the need for self-restraint over passions and desires.

➤ ***Why do so many Sikhs have a common name, Singh or Kaur?***

The tenth Sikh Guru, Guru Gobind Singh, created the unique identity of the Sikhs and also gave all Sikh men one last name - Singh - and all Sikh women another - Kaur. The reason for doing so is strongly rooted in the culture of South Asia. In that time period's caste-ridden society and even today, someone's last/family name signifies their social status and caste. Guru Gobind Singh wanted to remove these barriers between people, and create an egalitarian society. The word "Singh" means "Lion" and the word "Kaur" denotes "Princess." Over time, many Sikh families have reverted to using their family name, but have maintained Singh and Kaur as middle names.

History and Sikhs in America:

➤ ***Are all Sikhs Indians?***

No. Many Sikhs are from Punjabi backgrounds, i.e. their parents or grandparents lived in the South Asian State of Punjab, which is now divided between India and Pakistan. But Sikhs today live in all parts of the world and may be born in New York, London, or Turkey.

➤ ***How many Sikhs live in the United States?***

There are over 500,000 Sikh Americans and Sikhs have been in America for over 100 years.

➤ ***When did Sikhs first come to the USA?***

Sikhs began immigrating to the United States in the 1900s. They came as farmers and laborers. The first Gurdwara (place of Sikh congregation) was set up in California in 1906.

In the 1960s, the US government raised its immigration quotas, and the US economy demanded that the country welcome trained professionals with open arms. With other South Asians, Sikh doctors, engineers etc., immigrated to the USA in large numbers. In the 1980s yet another wave of Sikh immigration took place when anti-Sikh pogroms and government policies rocked the Indian part of Punjab and caused many Sikhs to flee to the United States for safe haven.

➤ ***Why was there a wave of Sikh immigration in the 1980s?***

Punjab, the state where Sikhism was born and flourished, was partitioned in 1947 and split between India and Pakistan at the time of independence. Most Sikhs chose to remain or move to the Indian side of Punjab, since India purported its new constitution as secular, whereas Pakistan was created on religious lines. However, in the 1970s and '80s, government negligence of the state of Punjab led to economic struggles and much resentment in the state. In 1984, the turmoil in the state escalated in bloody proportions when the Indian Government attacked the most venerated of Sikh Gurdwaras, the Golden Temple in Amritsar.

In the same year, government-organized anti-Sikh pogroms took place on the streets of the Indian capital, Delhi and spread throughout India. Several thousands of innocent Sikhs died. A separatist struggle resulted and Sikh militants went to war against the government. The government 'disappeared' thousands of young Sikhs, who were tortured and killed in underground 'police houses.' That is when Sikhs began seeking asylum in other countries, including the United States.

Gurdwaras (Sikh houses of worship):

➤ ***Do Sikhs have a clergy?***

No. The Sikh gurus were very clear about each Sikh making her or his own journey and not depending on clergy to show them the way. Sikhs do, however, have Granthis. These are people who have studied the Sikh scriptures extensively and are available in the Gurdwaras as teachers. They often lead a congregation, but members from the congregations – both men and women - can always perform the same ceremonies.

➤ ***Can women execute duties in a Gurdwara or congregation?***

Yes. Sikhism does not delineate/define certain tasks to only men or only women. A woman can lead or take part in any service or ceremony just as a man would. However, there are cultural constraints which sometimes lead to very few women being leaders in congregations.

➤ ***What is the bowing/matha teknaa?***

In every Gurdwara (Sikh place of congregation and worship), the Sikh scripture, the Guru Granth Sahib, is placed at the back of the room, and everyone who enters the room, bows in front of it and touches their forehead to the ground. This is a symbol of surrendering yourself to the message of the scripture. Visitors don't have to bow and can simply sit down with the congregation.

➤ ***Why are men and women divided into separate sections while sitting in the gurdwara?***

The Sikh Gurus always taught equality between the sexes. For instance, the Gurus decried the cultural climate that denied women access to religion and gave women equal rights as men in all spheres. Still, in Sikh congregations, men and women are asked to sit side by side—women on one side of the *Guru Granth Sahib*, and men on the other. There are both practical and cultural reasons for this practice. One can see this as a balance

between the two sexes. In some smaller Gurdwaras, men and women may be seen sitting mixed in the congregation.

➤ ***Langar—why sit down on the floor? It's a free buffet?!***

The Sikh Gurus instituted the unique Sikh practice of Langar to break down caste barriers. Langar is food that is cooked by the members of the community and served by members of the community, to all people at the Gurdwara. The idea is to demonstrate equality of all people, irrespective of caste, creed, religion, race or sex. All Gurdwaras have a common kitchen, where Langar is cooked by volunteers and open to all. Langar is communal cooking, eating and sharing and is eaten while sitting on the ground. When Sikhism was sprouting in the South Asian subcontinent, the caste system stratified society. Higher castes would sit on stools and chairs and eat, while the lowest caste were not allowed to eat even in the same room, and usually on the floor, away from sight. The Gurus wanted Sikhs to always practice egalitarianism and communal responsibility.

Langar is also free food. It is free because members of the congregation, according to their ability, make donations to the Gurdwara. Any visitor to the Gurdwara can eat there free. But Langar has an important communal aspect to it and is not just a 'free all-you-can-eat buffet'. Calling it a "buffet" may be insulting to this tradition because of its deep spiritual significance.

Traditions:

➤ ***Marriage ceremony-- Where, What, How?***

The Sikh marriage ceremony is called *Anand Karaj*. It is performed in the presence of the Guru Granth Sahib, the Sikh scripture. In a Sikh wedding, scripture is read from the Granth Sahib, and after each section the bride and groom walk around the Guru Granth Sahib, showing their commitment to the teachings being read. This is done four times. Following this, a communal prayer is said for the couple and religious hymns are sung. The ceremony may be performed by any initiated member of the Sikh faith. A specific priest is not required. The prayers being read indicate that the bride and the groom pledge allegiance to each other as well as the Sikh way of life and make a commitment to working together to help each other realize the Divine Presence.

➤ ***Funerals-- where, what, how?***

Sikhs burn their dead. As the body is bathed and clothed in fresh clothes by family members, Sikh prayers are said. The body is not taken to the Gurdwara, but community members say collective prayers. The ashes are usually gathered afterwards, and put afloat in a flowing body of water—returning the person's last physical remains to nature.

➤ ***What holidays do Sikhs celebrate?***

None. Each day is a re-birth, every day is to be celebrated and utilized toward becoming closer with God. However, traditionally many Sikhs gather in large numbers at local Gurdwaras to observe the following:

- All Gurburabs (Sikh Guru's birthdays) are celebrated in Sikh communities and Gurdwaras.
- Vaisakhi, April 14. This was the day the tenth Sikh guru, Guru Gobind Singh, created the Khalsa—the order of the initiated Sikhs and gave Sikhs their unique identity. This is one of the most important dates in Sikh history and is celebrated every year with pride.
- Guru Nanak's Gurburab, Nov. 5. The first Sikh Guru, Nanak's birthday.
- Guru Gobind's Gurburab, Jan 5. The tenth Guru, Gobind Singh's birthday.
- Martyrdom of Guru Arjun Dev, June 16

➤ ***Is there an official Sikh greeting?***

The tenth Sikh Guru instructed Sikhs to greet each other with “*Waheguru ji ka Khalsa, Waheguru ji ki Fateh!*” (The Khalsa, the Initiated Sikh belongs to the Timeless, Immortal Power, and every victory of the Khalsa, is a victory of the Supreme Power!). Another common Sikh greeting is *Sat Sri Akal!* “The Timeless, Immortal Power, is the Truth”.

➤ ***Do Sikhs have any dietary restrictions?***

The Sikh Gurus strongly forbade all rituals and superstitions. Sikhs are thus not allowed to eat any food prepared through a ritualistic process. Sikhs are not meant to eat Kosher (Jewish food prepared by a special ritual/process), or Halaal (Muslim meat prepared with a special ritual). Sikhs are also not supposed to drink alcohol or consume any other intoxicants.

➤ ***But I have seen Sikhs drink, how about that?***

Sikhs are forbidden from drinking alcohol or consuming intoxicants. Again, people are known to divert from the religious teachings. Tell them they should not be doing it.

➤ ***Is there a particular “Sikh Color”?***

No, there is no particular color for Sikhs garb, turbans, festivals etc. The Sikh flag that is hoisted at almost every Gurdwara is a bright orange/saffron color or dark blue. These represent traditional colors for Sikhs, but are not ‘Sikh colors.’

➤ ***What is the official language of the Sikhs?***

Sikhism was born and flourished in the South Asian area called the Punjab, where the main language is Punjabi. However, since its conception more than 500 years ago, Sikhs have immigrated to many different parts of the world and the religion has spread over all continents. Sikhs thus speak many languages. The Sikh scripture is written in various dialects and languages but has the common script, “Gurmukhi.”

Contemporary Issues:

➤ ***What do Sikhs think about terrorism and events like 9/11?***

Sikhs are against terrorism. Instead, Sikhs are commanded to defend the innocent and fight against oppression. Of course, some Sikhs have committed crimes against innocent victims, but these people do so against the teachings of the religion.

Recent media images cause a bias against people with turbans and beards, but in fact Sikhs support defending the innocent, not harming them.

➤ ***What does Sikhism say about pre-marital sex?***

Sikhs are forbidden to have sexual relations with anyone other than their spouse. Sikh teachings urge people to control all desires, including the sexual. The union of matrimony is considered very sacred and important, and sex outside this union is decried.

➤ ***Do Sikhs believe in birth control?***

The Sikh scriptures do not expressly say, “Thou shall not consume birth control pills”. However, Sikhism places a very high importance on family life and family planning.

➤ ***What does Sikhism say about abortion?***

Sikhism does not provide a definitive injunction on abortion. The Sikh scripture supports the notion that the fetus is a living organism while in the woman’s womb and is cared for by God. Sikh theology would, therefore, be conservative on this issue. At the same time, under extreme conditions such as rape, abortion would be permissible. During such conditions, Sikh tradition recommends that the affected woman consult with other distinguished Sikhs and come up with an appropriate decision. Therefore, the answer to this question depends on the circumstances. Abortion may not be performed to kill a female fetus by those who desire a male child—those who engage in this practice of female infanticide are known as *kuri-maars*, and are to be ostracized from the Sikh community, according to the Sikh Rehat Maryada.