



Sikhs and their Religion

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Sikhs in North America

Many of us have seen Sikhs and even worked alongside them without realizing who they are, what they believe, and how they live. We may even have confused them for Iranians or Arabs. We may have wondered about these men who wear colorful turbans over long uncut hair.

Sikhs are not new to North America. Their first recorded presence in Canada dates from 1897, over a hundred years ago; their first place of worship (gurdwara) in the United States was established in California in 1906. Sikhs helped construct the Panama Canal in 1904. Sikhism is now one of the five largest religions of the world. Over 500,000 Americans and 500,000 Canadians acknowledge Sikhism as their religion. There is a significant Sikh community in almost every major city in the United States and Canada, with over 100 Sikh places of worship and Community Centers. Some of the best farmers and lumber workers in California and British Columbia are Sikh. There are Sikh blue collar workers and taxi drivers; there are Sikh executives, research scientists and stock brokers in contemporary North American society. There has been a Sikh Congressman in the United States. In Canada, Sikhs serve as members of Parliament and as members of the Royal Canadian Mounted Police.

History and Beliefs

Compared to other major religions, Sikhism is relatively young. Its founder Guru Nanak was born in 1469 in Punjab. It was a time of great ferment and creative activity in the world - the voyage of Columbus and his discovery of the New World in 1492, the discoveries of Copernicus who was born in 1473, the printing of the Gutenberg Bible in 1462 were among the many remarkable achievements and events of those decades.

To understand his teachings and his disciples, it is necessary to look at Nanak the man and his times.

During Guru Nanak's time in the fifteenth century the two great religious systems of the world - the Vedantic and the traditions of the Old Testament met in Punjab. Fifteenth century India was ruled by Muslims. Indian society of that time was steeped in idol worship, dogma and superstition, and was stratified into castes with rigidly defined duties and rights for each. Neither those of the low castes nor women were allowed to read the Holy Scriptures.

Nanak rejected both the forced conversions by the rulers as well as the caste system, idolatry and the inferior place of women. He taught a message of love. He defined God as gender-free, not woman or man exclusively. He taught of a universal God, common to all mankind - not a Sikh God, a Hindu God, a Moslem God, a Jewish or a Buddhist God, or one limited to any sect, nation, race, creed, color or gender.

Guru Nanak was followed by nine successor-Gurus over two centuries. They further elaborated on his message of universal love and brotherhood - and sisterhood. They made significant contributions to the development of Sikh institutions. Sikhs believe that all ten Gurus represented the spirit of Nanak and spoke with his authority.

The Sikh religion is strictly monotheistic, believing in one supreme God, free of gender, absolute, all pervading, eternal Creator. This universal God of love is obtained through grace, sought by

service to mankind. These were the first teachings of Guru Nanak. Sikhism views life not as a fall from grace but a unique opportunity to discover and develop the divinity in each of us.

From the time of Guru Nanak five hundred years ago until today, Sikh places of worship (gurdwaras) all over the world usually run free community kitchens, which provide meals to the needy. These kitchens are manned and funded by volunteers. Since in the traditional Indian society people of high and low caste would not mix, nor would they break bread together, the community kitchen (langar) of the Sikhs serves to teach the concept of equality by shattering all barriers of caste and class.

Since human dignity and justice form a cornerstone of Sikh teaching, Sikh history speaks of tremendous sacrifice in the cause of freedom and justice. Two Sikh Gurus - the fifth Guru Arjan and the ninth Guru Tegh Bahadur were martyrs to the cause of freedom of religion. The tenth Nanak - Guru Gobind Singh - fought several battles and saw his sons die in battle. In more modern times, Sikhs formed some of the most highly decorated soldiers of the British armed services during the Second World War. They had a significant role in the memorable battles of El Alamein, in the Burma- China front and also in the allied assault in Italy. In India's struggle for independence from the British, of all the Indians who were sentenced to life imprisonment or death, over two-thirds were Sikh. This in spite of the fact that Sikhs form less than two percent of India's population.

1699 - Present: The Journey

In 1699 the tenth and last of the Sikh Gurus - Gobind Singh - recognized the growing maturity of his followers in a most dramatic manner. On the day of Vaisakhi (which falls in early to mid-April) 1699, he summoned his followers to a small town (Anandpur) in Punjab. Over 80,000 came. History tells us that Guru Gobind Singh appeared before his people, flashed a naked sword and demanded a head. He repeated his call until five Sikhs volunteered. These five came from different parts of India and from different castes, three were from the so-called lower castes. To these five, and to many others, on that historic April 300 years ago, he bestowed a new discipline, a creed.

The Guru initiated these five in the new order of the Khalsa and then, in a dramatic and historic gesture, they, in turn, initiated him. On that day he gave the Sikhs their modern form which includes five articles of faith:

- 1) unshorn hair as a gift of God and Guru and a mark of Sikh identity,
- 2) a small comb for the hair,
- 3) a steel bracelet which signifies a reality with no beginning and no end, and is also symbolic of a Sikh's commitment to the ideals of his faith, much as wedding ring might indicate fealty and identity,
- 4) a sword indicative of resolve and commitment to justice, and
- 5) knee-length breeches in keeping with the disciplined life-style of a Sikh.

In Indian society, an individual's name reveals his caste and thus his/her place in society. On Vaisakhi 1699, Guru Gobind Singh freed Sikhs from the caste system by ordaining that all Sikh males incorporate "Singh" meaning a lion and women use "Kaur" meaning a princess into their names, thus shedding their caste identity.

Implied here would be the hope and prayer that a Sikh's life becomes a testament to courage and grace inherent in these names.

For the past 300 years, no matter what their street attire, male Sikhs have been easily recognized by their long unshorn hair covered with a turban. (It needs to be pointed out that in the traditional

Indian society, only a man of high caste or the ruling class wore a turban.) Sikh women adhere to the same basic life style, symbols, rules and conduct, except that few wear turbans. You might see Sikh boys, who are much too young to handle a turban, walking about in their schools or play grounds with a top-knot of long unshorn hair covered simply with a scarf.

Sikhs worldwide celebrated Vaisakhi 1999 as a milestone in Sikh history. It marked 300 years since Guru Gobind Singh decreed the formation of the Khalsa and fashioned the nation of Sikhs.

The Sikh Scripture

Guru Gobind Singh also decreed an end to the line of personal Gurus in human form. The writings of the earlier Gurus were collated along with those of Hindu and Moslem saints whose teachings were consistent with Sikh philosophy. This collection - Guru Granth - is thus a uniquely ecumenical and eclectic collection of spiritual writing. For Sikhs Guru Granth is the repository of all spiritual knowledge and authority. In temporal matters all authority rests with the Sikh community worldwide acting democratically and in mindful prayer with an awareness of the spiritual heritage which is embodied in the Guru Granth.

Sikhs revere the ten Gurus - Guru Nanak to Guru Gobind Singh because they brought to us the divine word but they worship only the one, timeless (Akal) God. For Sikhs the word (shabd) is the eternal Guru. The word "Guru" acquires, therefore, a very special meaning for Sikhs. It is reserved only for the ten Gurus who gave us the divine message and to the shabad contained in the Guru Granth.

The Gurdwara

The Sikh place of worship (gurdwara) is more than that - a place of worship. It has historically served as a refuge for the homeless, the helpless and the destitute. Gurdwaras usually display and fly the "Nishan Sahib," a yellow (saffron) triangular flag bearing the Sikh symbol of "Khanda". Visitors, irrespective of their religion are offered shelter, comfort and food. The only conditions being that they remove the shoes and cover the head. In a gurdwara no special place or seat may be reserved or set aside for any dignitary.

The worship consists of singing of the liturgy as well as exposition of Sikh history, tradition and religion. Non-Sikhs are always welcome. Any layperson - man or woman - may perform any Sikh rites; none are restricted to the ordained clergy.

The Sikh Way of Life

The word "Sikh" derivatively means a student. In essence, therefore, a Sikh is and remains a student of the meaning of life.

World View

Sikhism is a practical religion to be lived here on earth and Sikhs are a pragmatic people. The emphasis is on a leading a worldly, successful life as a householder and a contributing member of society but with the mind attuned to an awareness of God, the eternal truth. Sikhism rejects all distinctions based on caste, creed, gender, color, race or national origin. God is not found on the mountaintop or by renouncing the world. He/She is found in the life of a householder and in a family.

The philosophic structure of Sikhism rests on three equally important legs: an honest living and an honest day's work, sharing with others what God and life have given us, and living life fully - not in half measures - with an awareness of the infinite within each of us.

Sikhism enunciates a philosophical concept termed Miri-Piri which means living a worldly life with an active, strong sense of commitment to the world and humanity, governed and directed by a strong foundation and underpinning of spiritual awareness. In a centered existence the internal and external lives are to be integrated. Moral and spiritual values need to form the cornerstone of the successful worldly life. One without the other is incomplete and insufficient.

In matters that affect the Sikh community, the Sikhs have throughout their history followed a simple but effective mechanism whereby individual voices are heard and decisions reflect the current state of knowledge, information and technology. In all such matters, and in honor of the first five Sikhs who heeded the call of Guru Gobind Singh in 1699, the voice of the community is channeled through five Sikhs selected and authorized to resolve issues and speak as the voice of the community. Sikhs believe that God and Guru pervade the congregation when these five Sikhs act in mindful prayer. Decision making, thus, becomes a collective process. Sikhs do not have a priestly hierarchy with its associated ecclesiastical authority.

As a religion in which the Word (shabad) is Guru, Sikhism values education. Yet it recognizes that the ultimate reality is such that our senses cannot perceive it and our intellect cannot fathom it but our souls can commune with it.

Place of Women

Sikhism promises women an equal place. It could do no less when it defines God as gender neutral, and is perhaps one of the few major world religions to do so. Female infanticide, which was not uncommon in India and in much of the world 500 years ago, was strongly condemned by Guru Nanak and his successors. There is no activity in a gurdwara or within the community that is permitted to a man but not to a woman. There is no religious function from which women are barred at any time of their lives.

Food Taboos

Sikhs have no food taboos except those that stem from one simple injunction - a life of moderation in which we shun all that harms the body or the mind. Animal sacrifice is forbidden and so is the consumption of animals killed in such manner. This also means that all intoxicants - tobacco, alcohol or any mind altering "recreational" drugs are forbidden. Sikhism teaches that our lives must become a testament to truth and service to mankind.

How Sikhs View Other Religions

Sikhism recognizes the universal truths that underlie all human endeavors, religions and belief systems, though people differ in how they institutionalize those beliefs into a code of conduct and a way of life. Much as Sikhs love their religion, Sikhism is equally respectful and tolerant of another - a non-Sikh - who loves his or her own religion in his or her own way. Sikhism asks a non-Sikh to discover and live the essential message and meaning of his own religion so that a Christian can become a better Christian, Jew a better Jew, Hindu a better Hindu, while a Sikh becomes a better Sikh, and so on.

Every major city in the United States and Canada has Sikh gurdwaras and they are open to all. You don't have to be Sikh to visit one. Drop in and see how your Sikh neighbors live and pray.

*Next time you see a Sikh at work or on the street greet him with "Sat Sri Akal."
It means "Truth is Eternal." The sentiment in it, you will agree, is universal.*

Have more questions for the author? You can reach him at ljsingh99@gmail.com.