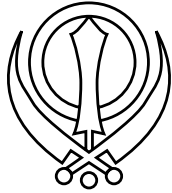


SIKHISM: A PRIMER



The circle signifies the all-pervasive God and sole beholder of the universe. The double-edged sword signifies God's order of life and death. The crossed scimitars signify God's sovereignty over both spiritual and temporal worlds.



ORIGINS

“Sikh” means disciple in Pali dialect. A Sikh is one who seeks truth—one who studies religion and philosophy. Sikhism arose in 16th century Punjab, India. In spite of the religious intolerance and political oppression prevalent in that region at that time, there were philosophers and mystics of diverse traditions who recognized that their quest for the divine was a mutual one.

- Sikhism's founder is Guru Nanak (1469-1539). “Guru” is Sanskrit for “enlightener”: one who transforms darkness into light. At age 36, Guru Nanak was transformed by a divine revelation. He then traveled through the Middle East and Asia, proclaiming a practical faith and a vision of society in which everyone would strive for the good of all.
- The second guru modified the Punjabi alphabet into Gurmukhi, script—standard for Sikhism. The fourth guru made Amritsar Sikhism's holy city and site of its Golden Temple. The fifth guru began to compile its scriptures.
- Under the sixth guru, two swords became the symbol of spiritual and earthly power. This guru preached defense against religious persecution. The ninth guru was martyred for his belief in religious freedom for all.
- Sikhism's tenth and last guru in human form was Guru Gobind Singh (1666-1708). He insti-

tuted the Order of *Khalsa* (pure ones, or saint-soldiers) in 1699. Spiritual authority was now enshrined in the Sikh scriptures, temporal authority would rest in the Council of Five Sikhs.

- After years of political oppression, many Sikh confederacies were founded in 1765. In 1799, a Sikh Commonwealth was established in Punjab, but was annexed by the British in 1849. Since then, Sikhs have struggled to regain sovereign status.
- With some 22 million adherents, Sikhism is now fifth among the six largest world religions.



BELIEFS

- Sikhs believe that God is One, unbounded by time and space. God is called *Nam* (Divine Name), *Wabeguru* (Almighty), or *Sat* (Eternal Truth). Sikhs believe in constant remembrance of God. As creator of the entire universe, God is distinct from—yet present in—all things and people. This informs the Sikh principles of equality, eternity, justice, respect for human dignity, and freedom of conscience



“love your neighbor as yourself”



for all—without distinction by creed, color, race, gender or social status.

- The Sikh world view recognizes both cosmic unity (divine Spirit) and physical diversity (divine Reality). It believes that, because human nature is controlled by ignorance and vices such as lust, pride, covetousness, and anger, humans are caught in the endless cycle of birth and rebirth. Release comes only by God's grace, but selfless service and human effort blending courage and dignity with humility and compassion can create a favorable environment for that grace.

- Sikhs believe in reincarnation, immortality of the soul, and the soul's eventual return to God.

- Sikhs believe in living according to the example and teachings of the Gurus. They confirm their faith through the rite of initiation ("taking *amrit*"); which, they believe, eliminates any former class or caste distinction and imposes the duty to adhere to the code of conduct of the faith.

- Sikhs believe that the body houses the spirit; thus it must be accorded respect by careful diet and by maintaining the balance between body, mind, and spirit. They believe that humanity is created in God's image, and to cut one's hair or to shave would mar this image.

- Sikhs believe in the importance of marriage and family.



WRITINGS

- The sacred scripture of Sikhism is the *Adi Granth* (First Holy Book): 6000-plus verses which include the inspired words of Sikh Gurus, Muslim Sufis and Hindu saints (some of whom are "Untouchables").

- Copies of the *Adi Granth* are always uniform in page contents and numbering. The

task of putting the *Adi Granth* into written form began in 1604 under Guru Arjan Dev. It took final form in the late 17th century under Guru Gobind Singh. Traditionally, it is recorded in Gurmukhi script, which is related to Hindi and Punjabi.

Sikhism's Three Principles

God is the only Doer and Giver

Work hard and earn an honest living

Share with those in need

- When Guru Gobind Singh transferred his spiritual authority to the *Adi Granth* rather than to a human successor, this sacred text became Sikhism's eleventh Guru—a living teacher revered as Divine Light, God's Word, source of spiritual guidance. Therefore, it is often called *Sri Guru Granth Sahib* (Lord Holy Book).

- To read the *Adi Granth* in its entirety takes two full days if read in the original Gurmukhi, or three if read in English.

- Songbooks for use in worship make use of texts from the *Adi Granth*. These songbooks must be treated respectfully and must be kept off the floor when not in use.

- The *Adi Granth* was first translated into English by Max Arthur Macauliffe in the early 1900s. Dr. Gopal Singh and Sardar Manmohan Singh have made recent translations.

- Some Sikhs practice the blessing of a new home or business with a reading of the entire *Adi Granth*. This is a relatively new custom.



PRACTICE

- Sikhs believe that Guru Nanak's three prominent teachings provide a path to union with God: that earning an honest living through hard work, that sharing one's earnings with the needy, and that acknowledging God as the only Doer and Giver—all are necessary.

- Sikh practice includes a rich heritage of distinctive customs. *Khande-di-Pabul*: the pre-dawn rite of full initiation as a Sikh, in which one is sprinkled with *amrit* (nectar)—sweetened water stirred by a two-edged sword—and is instructed in the Sikh code of conduct by the *Panj Piare* (five Beloved Ones).

- Initiated Sikhs add a suffix to their names: *Singh* (lion) for men, *Kaur* (princess) for women.

- Initiation makes a Sikh a member of the *Khalsa*. Thereafter, one must always wear the five K's—five articles of faith prescribed by Guru Gobind Singh.

- Sikhism demands abstinence from alcohol, tobacco, and drugs. It calls for maintaining a positive, spiritual state of mind through such disciplines as medita-

tion on the *Mool Mantra* (a declaration of the oneness and nature of God), recitation of five hymns daily, and the constant remembrance of God's name.

- Sikh congregations meet in a *Gurdwara* (House of the Guru). Many *gurdwaras* are open every day. They are centers for social and educational activities and may also serve as guest houses for travelers.

- A *Gurdwara* can be a special building, or a room in any home or building prepared appropriately for the occasion. Everyone must remove their shoes, and wear a head covering when entering. The *Adi Granth* (Sikh scriptures) is the focus. It is placed under a canopied platform by attendants who care for it and serve the congregation *prasad*—a sweet pudding considered to be a gift from the *Adi Granth*.

- Sikh worship makes use of reverent postures, songs praising God, petitions for God's blessing, and scripture readings chosen at random. A sermon on a spiritual, social, or political topic may be given. Anyone—male or female—may lead Sikh worship.

The Five K's

Kesha: unshorn hair covered with a *dashar* (men's turban) or a *chunnis* (women's scarf.)

Kanga: a comb kept in one's hair for grooming twice daily.

Kara: an iron or stainless-steel bracelet on the right wrist.

Kachcha: an undergarment of short pants as a reminder to be chaste.

Kirpan: a small sword which symbolizes the sacred duty to defend the oppressed and to fight the oppressor.

- Weekly worship (Friday evening or Sunday morning) lasts two hours or more. It concludes with a meal open to the community at large. Daily morning and evening worship is shorter. Prayer may be sung, sometimes with instrumental accompaniment.

- Because they recognize that God may be worshiped in many ways, Sikhs respect all religious expressions, but will not participate in the rituals and customs specific to another faith.



ORGANIZATION

- The local congregation is served by an elected Board of Trustees and its officers, and finances itself through donations, offerings, and pledges.

- Some congregations employ a *gyani* (preacher)—a full-time religious leader who acts as teacher, administrator, leader of services, and interpreter of religious laws. Most are trained in Punjab, but there are no universal requirements. The *gyani* need not report to a higher authority, but does maintain a relationship to the *Jathedar*, the world leader of Sikhism who is based at the World Headquarters in Akhal Takht, Amritsar, Punjab



SOCIAL ACTION

- The crossed swords of the Sikh symbol indicate the relationship between attention to one's personal spirituality and one's obligation to serve the needy and the oppressed. Sikhism expects humble, selfless service—done without motive or compensation, with no distinction between friends and enemies. Sikhism advocates justice, truth, and equality for all people—regardless of gender, caste, religion, or race.
- Sikhs pledge a portion of their income to support charitable actions.
- The *langar*—the sacred kitchen so characteristic of Sikhism—originated with Guru Nanak. At a Sikh post-worship meal, all who attend are seated in a line to avoid any distinctions, and all who wish to eat are served.



HOLIDAYS

- Sikhs follow a lunar calendar. All holidays follow a similar pattern of celebration: three days of worship, with special food distributed free from the *langar*.
- The dates for commemorating the birthday of each of the ten gurus are distributed throughout the year. Those of the founder (Guru Nanak) and of the tenth guru (Guru Gobind Singh) are especially important.
- *Baisaki* commemorates the formation of the Khalsa in 1699.
- Guru Granth Day celebrates the proclamation that the Sikh holy book is the perpetual living Guru.



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