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The Sikhs and Their Religion

by

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THE SIKHS AND THEIR RELIGION

The Sikh religion is the youngest of the major religions of the world with the exception of the Baha'i faith. The Sikhs number about 20 million worldwide but constitute a majority (68%) in Punjab, India. There were few Sikhs living outside of India till 1960. With changes in immigration laws and persecution combined with unemployment in Punjab, the number of Sikhs in western countries has grown remarkably. They now constitute visible minorities in USA, Canada, and Britain. Many Sikhs in these countries have achieved distinction in various professions, in business and farming, as well as in public service. The number of gurdwaras (Sikh places of worship) in USA has grown from only a couple in the 1960's over a hundred.

A set of beliefs, a cohesive organization, and a special history define the faith and consequently the unique identity of its adherents. The Sikh religion started with ten Gurus from Siri Guru Nanak Sahib (1469-1539 CE) to Siri Guru Gobind Singh Sahib (1666-1708 CE). Before he left the mortal world, Siri Guru Gobind Singh Sahib instructed the Sikhs to regard the Granth Sahib, consisting of verses given by six of the ten Gurus as well as selections from the works of several Hindu and Muslim saints and holy men, as their eternal Guru. It is the Sikh scripture, referred to as Siri Guru Granth Sahib and regarded by Sikhs as the Word of God.

Sikh Beliefs

Sikhs believe in one God, revealed to mankind through the Guru. The Sikh view of God is summarized in the *mool mantar* - an expression used, in full or in abbreviated form, at the start of every collection of verses in Siri Guru Granth Sahib. The *mool mantar* is:

> "One God, Eternal, The Reality, The Name, Creator and Doer, All-pervading,
> Without fear, Without rancor, transcending time, Unincarnate, Self-existent,
> (undrerstood) through the Guru's Grace."

Elsewhere in Siri Guru Granth Sahib, God is stated to be indescribable, formless, merciful and loving, just and gracious, the Eternal Giver, Provider and Sustainer. Among the names used for God in Siri Guru Granth Sahib is *Vaheguru*, the Wondrous Guru. The word 'guru' in Indian languages means teacher or guide. However, in the Sikh religion, the Guru occupies a special position. The Guru and God are practically identical. While God is unknowable and unborn, the Guru is the Perfect Being with whom people can communicate and from whom they receive advice. He manifests all divine attributes including immortality. According to Siri Guru Granth Sahib: "My True Guru is forever; He does not come and go." Also: "Know the Guru and God to be one and the same." The Guru is not in the cycle of birth and death like other mortals but comes to the world for the salvation of mankind. His mission is to bless people with God's Name and to unite them with God. Human life is an opportunity to meet God. Following one's own wayward mind, this opportunity is wasted in pursuit of transitory gratification. Lust, anger, greed, attachment and self-will are impediments to understanding God. Merely reading and reciting the scriptures, going on pilgrimages, bathing in holy rivers, fasting, renunciation, celibacy, various yogic routines, charity, etc., are useless exercises. Skills of the mind and body only enhance one's ego unless one has understood the Guru's Word. One has to cleanse one's mind of the dirt of self-will and in humility seek the True Guru's help in understanding the purpose of life. The True Guru instructs the Sikh about God, warns him of the impediments, and instructs him in a lifestyle that would prepare him for the ultimate union with God and for eternal joy. Meeting the True Guru is possible only through God's Mercy. The Sikh prays to God for that. The Sikh faith denounces idolatry and hypocrisy and holds that the ultimate joy is obtained through constant remembrance of God, enabling one to see Him in oneself and in all of His Creation. The relationship between God and Creation is analogous to that between the ocean and the wave. Once this is understood, there can be no inequality among people, and no intolerance. One sees God in everything.

Sikh Lifestyle and Religious Practices

A Sikh follows the Gurus' teachings and tries to live by them to achieve liberation while leading the life of an ordinary householder. A Sikhs' motto is *Naam japo, kirt karo, vand chhako*, i.e., remember God, engage in honest labor, and share the fruits of that labor. A Sikh seeks the company of others who love God and rejoices in shared love of the Divinity. In 1699, Siri Guru Gobind Singh Sahib introduced *Khande da Pahul* (initiation with the double-edged sword), which has come to be called the *Amrit* ceremony. Addressing the congregation, he asked for a volunteer willing to present his head. He is said to have taken the volunteer inside and coming out with a sword dripping blood, asked for another. Thus, in turn, he got five volunteers and gave them *Khande da Pahul*. The Guru called them his *Panj Piyaare* (Five Beloved Ones) and asked them to give him the *Pahul*. Many other Sikh men and women received the *Pahul*. The initiates were called *Khalsa* meaning the "chosen ones" (of the Guru). The *Khalsa* lifestyle was to be that of "saint-soldiers" exemplified by the Gurus during their own lifetimes. They were to be a brotherhood of equals, regardless of caste. They were to bear arms, to be trained in their use and to be prepared to fight as soldiers whenever the occasion arose. The *Khalsa* were required to wear the five k's. The most visible of these is the uncut hair (*kes* in Punjabi). The others are *kachch* (special type of shorts), *kara* (an iron bangle), *kirpaan* (a sword) and *kangha* (a small wooden comb). The children were to be brought up as *Khalsa* and to be prepared for taking the Pahul when they were old enough. Any Sikh who after taking the *Pahul* violates the commandments is a *patit* or "fallen" one. Repentance and implementation of advice, given by five *amritdhari* (those who have taken the *Pahul*) Sikhs in the presence of Siri Guru Granth Sahib, would make the person eligible for forgiveness or re-initiation. The assembly of all *amritdharis*, the *Guru Panth*, was invested with guruship by the Tenth Guru and is the ultimate authority in all matters affecting the faith. The role of the *Khalsa* has been to defend their faith, protect the weak, and to fight oppression by unjust authority. Sikhs believe in universal equality, freedom of worship for all, and have always been ready to fight oppression in defense of the downtrodden. Sikh history includes moments of supreme sacrifice. A unique example is that of Siri Guru Tegh Bahaadar Sahib, the Ninth Guru, who was executed by the authorities for advocating the right of the Hindus to free worship. The Sikh attitude is summed up in the prayer composed by Siri Guru Gobind Singh Sahib:

"O Lord, grant me the boon that I should never desist from righteous acts. May I not be afraid of the enemy when I go to battle; may I resolutely ensure my victory. And, I should train my mind so that it would always desire to sing Your praise. When the end of my life is certain, may I die fighting in the thick of battle."

The Sikhs have no priests. Any Sikh, man or woman, can officiate at any religious ceremony. Committees, elected by the local membership, manage Sikh places of worship. Historical shrines in Punjab are managed by an elected committee. In various countries around the world autonomous Sikh congregations elect committees to run their facilities. Their common link is allegiance to *Guru Panth* and the *Sikh Rehit Maryada* (Sikh Principles of Living). All disputes can be appealed to Siri Akal Takhat Sahib. Recently, World Sikh Council has been set up under the patronage of Siri Akal Takhat Sahib to link all Sikh institutions.

Relationship with other Faiths

Although the Sikh religion shares some beliefs with Islam, Christianity, Judaism as well as some schools of Hindu thought, it is distinct from them. According to Siri Guru Granth Sahib:

> "I do not fast nor do I observe Ramadan, I only serve One God who always protects me. I do not go on Hujj to Kaa'ba nor do I go on any pilgrimage. I serve only One and no other. I am not a Hindu nor am I a Muslim."

However, tolerance toward other religions is an integral part of the faith. According to the Guru:

> "Everyone's God is the same and there is no other. Through Guru's grace He manifests in a person's mind. God knows the innermost thoughts of all and resides in everyone. Concentrating on God's Word, how can we call anyone bad? A person talks of bad and good only so long as he is lost in the Duality. Through the Guru, one understands the One (God) and immerses oneself in Him."
>
> "Don't say the Vedas or the Books (scriptures of Islam, Christianity, and Judaism) are false. False is one who does not study (them)."

History of Persecution

Historically, the organization of Sikhs as the *Khalsa Panth* has been viewed by successive governments in India with suspicion as a "state within a state." This is especially so because the Sikh faith requires its adherents to keep weapons, a *kirpaan* being the symbolic minimum. As this organization conceivably provides the Sikhs with the potential for concerted action, various governments have tried to control it directly as well as indirectly. Complete elimination of Sikhs was ordered in the 18th century but did not entirely succeed. After an initial effort (1846 to 1855) to liquidate the *Khalsa* and to thoroughly disarm the Sikh population, the British used the Sikhs' pride in their history of warfare to recruit them heavily into the military. However, Sikhs not in the military were not allowed to even keep their traditional *kirpaan* till 1914. The Sikhs did not have control over their places of worship and won it only in 1925 after a long-drawn nonviolent struggle. Unarmed demonstrators were fired upon, charged by mounted cavalry, and beaten up with baton charges resulting in sacrifice of many lives. After India's freedom from British rule in 1947, the Indian national leaders who, when they were negotiating the boundaries of India and Pakistan, saw no difficulty in demarcating an area in the north where the "Sikhs also could experience the glow of freedom" went back upon their promises. The Sikhs struggled for a measure of autonomy but their aspirations were ruthlessly opposed as anti-national activity. The desire for preservation of religious identity was equated with political separatism and treason. There seems to be an assumption, by the majority Hindu community, that the concept of *Guru Panth* is inherently separatist. During the last two decades, the Indian Government specially targeted formally initiated Sikhs labeling them as separatists, militants, extremists, and terrorists. Tens of thousands were liquidated in "faked encounters" and torture in police custody. Thousands have been jailed without trial under draconian laws. Countless others were forced to seek shelter in countries of the free world. Sikhs in India are being forced to become "moderate", i.e., to view themselves as a Hindu sect, regard *Khande da Pahul* and the associated lifestyle as no longer relevant, reinterpret history, and de-emphasize their religious identity. Many Sikhs feel that they have yet to achieve freedom to practice their religion as taught by the Gurus. Frustration and oppression has led to the demand for separation of Punjab from India and the creation of an independent state - Khalistan.

