**Sikhism**

By Dr. Brady Blevins

**Founder:** Guru Nanak Dev (1469-1539)  
**Founded:** 1469 AD

**Texts:** Adi Granth also referred to as Guru Granth Sahib; Dasam Granth; Janamsakhis  
**Key Terms:** Guru, Gurdwara, and Samsara

### INTRODUCTION

Sikh, in the Punjabi language, means “disciple;” specifically in reference to being a disciple of God who follows the writings and teachings of the ten Sikh Gurus. The sacred text of the Sikhs is the *Adi Granth*, which is a collection of 3,384 hymns composed by seven of the ten gurus, Bhagtas (saints of various faiths) and other contributors. There are two other texts (*Dasam Granth* and *Janamsakhis*) that are considered major texts but not equal to the *Adi Granth*. Sikhism self-identifies as a monotheistic religion that worships a god to whom multiple names are attributed and is neither identified as male or female. Sikhism originated in Northern India and the main temple is in Amritsar, India. The temple is commonly referred to as the “Golden Palace” because of the gold plating that adorns the walls of the upper floors. The official name is *Harimandir Sahib* meaning “House of God.” There are local community centers called Gurdwara where a weekly meal is shared and a copy of the *Adi Granth* is centrally featured. The religion boasts of the equality it purports for men and women, claiming that it has been and is ahead of its time. Sikhism offers a pluralistic worldview claiming that multiple paths may lead one to the divine, as long as that path is followed in love. This mindset has not fostered a history of mission work or proselyting.

There are approximately 25 million adherents making it the fifth largest religion in the world. The majority live in Northern India while it is estimated that about 280,000 Sikhs live in North America. Sikhs made their way to the United States about 100 years ago primarily settling on the coasts with a large concentration in Queens, NY. The Sikh population in the United States increased greatly in the 60's and again in the 80's due to a volatile political climate in India. Sikhs are generally nonaggressive but have moved to a defensive posture in India amongst political unrest. While many Sikhs are often confused for Muslims in the United States their appearance is actually an easy indicator of their faith as the men wear turbans and grow thick beards.

### HISTORY & PRACTICES

Sikhism began with the birth of its founder Guru Nanak Dev. He was born in India to a Muslim family that converted to Hinduism. Nanak was influenced heavily by the conflict between the Hindu and Muslim faiths. This conflict swayed him to hold a syncretic view of the two faiths. However, it was in the beginning of the 16th century that Nanak claimed to have had a vision in which God told him that he was to be known as the Guru. Nanak would be the first of ten gurus and after this encounter he began his efforts to seek devoted disciples (or Sikhs).

In summation of his meeting with God he stated, “There is neither Hindu or Muslim, so whose path should I follow? I will follow God’s path, and God is neither Hindu nor Muslim.” This statement was the cornerstone of his teaching as he had both Hindu and Muslim followers; who saw him “as a great religious leader whose mystical experiences transcended their sectarian divisions.” He was critical of the ceremonies and external observances of Hinduism and practices such as pilgrimages and ritual bathing in Islam. He also condemned the Hindu religious leaders (*pandits*) for pursuing position and profit and the Muslim clerics for being caught up in systems and words that kept them from understanding God. Nanak believed that the reason for the various religions and views of God was due to man’s failure to grasp the divine essence of God. His teaching was radical in that it made significant social changes in the culture of India, which had been shaped by Hindu and Muslim faiths that were prevalent in India. “For example, he did away with Islam’s requirement
that women wear veils, and replaced Hinduism’s caste system with a faith which both rich and poor partook in a kind of communal meal.”^11

**The Ten Gurus**

The ten Gurus of Sikhism provided the foundation and leadership for the religion. There is an eleventh guru accepted amongst Sikhs but this final guru is not human; rather it is the sacred text the Adi Granth. This eleventh guru is considered to be the final guru and will stay in office for all eternity. Nanak, the first Guru, selected his predecessor (Guru Angad) prior to his death in 1539. The time span from his death to the death of the final human guru (Gobind Singh) was 169 years.

The second of the ten gurus, Guru Angad Dev, succeeded Nanak as the leader of the faith. Sikh tradition states that when Nanak named Angad as the predecessor in the office of Guru the event marked the inauguration of the Panth or path. Angad Dev is credited for compiling the Gurmukhi script that became the writing medium of the Punjabi language. He also wrote some of the hymns in the Granth Sahib. From Angad Dev the office was passed to Amar Das. Guru Amar Das significant contributions consisted of granting equal rights to women, allowing widows to remarried and speaking against the caste systems. The forth guru was Ram Das whose best known for establishing the city of Amristar, India which is the holiest city in Sikhism.

A significant change of direction occurs with the fifth guru in Sikhism. During the tenure of the first four gurus there was peace between Sikhs and the Muslim Mughal rulers of Northern India. Arjan Dev became the fifth guru when he was 18 years old and held the office until his martyrdom at the age of 43. The Mughal emperor Jehangir captured Arjan Dev and tortured him in an attempt to force him to renounce his faith but Arjan refused and eventually died in prison. However, before his capture Guru Arjan Dev was responsible for erecting the Golden Temple in Amritsar, establishing the Sikh canon and is responsible for the composition of over one-third of the hymns. Before his death Arjan encouraged his son, and successor, to “sit fully armed upon the throne,” because he understood the threat that the Mughal leader posed. His son Hargobind became the sixth guru at ten years of age. He established himself as a military and spiritual leader always wearing two swords that symbolized his dual leadership. He also established the Akal Takht (Timeless or Almighty Throne) in the Golden Temple. Guru Hari Rai was the seventh guru and faced increasing tensions with the Mughal emperor. He was 14 year old when he became guru and held the office for 17 years. He was succeeded by his five year-old son, Hari Krishan, who became the eighth guru, but only lived to the age of eight and was replaced by Tegh Bahadur, the ninth guru. The Mughal emperor martyred Tegh Bahadur when he voiced opposition to the tax imposed by the emperor, then refused to renounce his faith.

The tenth and final human guru was Gobind Singh. He became guru when he was eight years old and held the office until his death at age 42. Guru Singh is highly revered by Sikhs. “Every Sikh male adds Singh (which means ‘lion’ or ‘lion-hearted’) after his given name; while females add Kaur (‘princess’) after their names.”^16 “Realizing that the position made its holder a target, as the Guru lay dying from wounds inflicted by a Muslim assassin he declared that henceforth the Adi Granth would be the Guru.” The Guru Granth Sahib is treated as if it were a human guru. A ceremony is held each morning as it is brought out and is seated in a place of honor and again in the evening as it is returned to its resting place. The book is fanned with feathers as it is being read and Sikhs bow before it and always backs away from it (so as to never turn one’s back on the book). Gobind declared to the Panth (or community) that God inspired the Adi Granth and that the gurus were the mouthpieces of God. His immediate concern for the faith was the physical defense of the faith, calling on the adherents to fight and be willing to die to maintain the tenets of Sikhism.

The original purpose of the Panth was to establish a community whose goal was to reconcile Hindus and Muslims. However, when Gobind Singh realized that they could no longer have peace with the Mughals they developed a military to defend Sikhism. He established the Khalsa order or Panth. Khalsa is an initiated order meaning “the pure” solider saints. This includes men and women who have experienced the Sikh baptism and have undergone the sacred Amrit ceremony. “The Khalsa baptism ceremony is undertaken as part of ones own personal spiritual evolution when the initiate is ready to fully live up to the high expectations of Guru Gobind Singh.” In addition to the baptism, the Amrit ceremony “consist of multiple vows: no use of tobacco or any intoxicants, no cutting or removal of hair, the wearing of a turban, no eating animals sacrificed in the Muslim way, no illicit sex (outside of marriage).” These four rules constitute the Sikh code of conduct. Once completing the ceremony the adherents are considered pure. Sikhs are expected to be either working towards or fully initiated in the Khalsa order.
DOCTRINE

Sikhs, like Muslims, believe in one God. They believe God is transcendent above all creeds and systems. Within their theology is a form of pluralism in that they believe that God is known in various guises by different religions. However, there are distinct differences between the God of Sikhism and other religions. The nature of God would thus be described as “one supreme, impersonal, true God, who is just and gracious, but beyond knowing or comprehending, though He dwells everywhere, including within our own being.” According to their sacred text God “has no form, no shape, no color; God is beyond these three qualities.”

Man: Mankind’s primary problem, in relation to knowing God, is not sin but one’s ignorance of God. The only way this problem can be rectified is when followers submit themselves to God’s message as revealed by the words of the Gurus and other inspired devotional mystics. Sikh’s teach a spiritual evolution that consists of four stages a person goes through that ends in salvation. The first stage is Manmukh, which describes the individual as self-centered and concerned with the material world and oblivious to God. The second stage is Sikh; this is anyone who meets the criteria as defined in the Rehat Maryada (code of conduct) and is on a path of learning about God. The third stage is the Khalsa, which represents a total dedication to God. This person will have completed the Amrit ceremony and honors the memory of Guru Gobind Singh by humbling themselves and doing good deeds. The final stage is Gurmukh, which is achieved when one has obtained mukhti and is completely God-centered.

Reincarnation and Karma: Similar to Hinduism, Sikhism teaches samsara which is “a system of reincarnation based on the forces of karma.” They believe all living creatures are part of a cycle of rebirth and that every person’s current situation is a direct result of past actions. Human existence is the highest stage in samsara and it is only in this stage that one can break the cycle.

Maya: This teaching is basic to both Hindu and Buddhist. The doctrine of Maya teaches that matter is an illusion and that through this illusion God’s presence is hidden from mankind. People do not have the reality of God; therefore, the illusion that is Maya is the ultimate source of all evil. Since Sikhs believe that “God is the ultimate source of everything, all is really God;” a person must overcome the illusion to know God. This can occur through karma, reincarnation, good works and meditation. Through these practices one can overcome Maya and obtain oneness with God, which is mukhti.

Salvation: “Mukhti (salvation) is more enlightenment than deliverance from sin; it is becoming God-centered by realizing-through meditation and good works-His presence within.” The ultimate goal of a person is to break or become free from the cycle of rebirth; but according to Sikhism a person is only able to achieve this by God’s grace. However, a closer consideration of the Sikh text reveals something different. “Those who meditate on God attain salvation. For them, the cycle of birth and death is eliminated.”

Articles of Faith: “Sikhs have five articles of faith natively known as Kakaars or Five K’s. The articles include Kesh (uncut hair), Kanga (comb), Kara (bracelet), Kirpan (sword) and Kachehra (a special type of shorts).” Once a Sikh is baptized they are expected to wear all five articles of faith. Guru Gobind Singh Ji is credited for creating a lifestyle to keep Sikh’s focused on living a life pleasing to God. Each of these five articles carries a deep meaning for Sikh. The Kesh represents living in harmony with God and the hair is to be unshorn, and kept protected in a turban, which keeps the Sikh focused on his beliefs and allows for social identity and cohesion. The Kanga is a special wooden comb to keep one’s hair clean and groomed. Since hair is seen as a gift from God it is essential that the hair be maintained twice a day and the turban wrapped neatly. The Kara is a
bracelet that symbolizes the Sikh’s responsibility to refrain from evil deeds. The Kirpan, or sword, is a symbol for courage and self-defense. Finally, the Kachehra (under shorts) is a reminder to live faithfully and practice restraint.

**CHRISTIAN RESPONSE**

Sikhism is a stand-alone religion that blends aspects of Islam and Hinduism. While there are some similarities between the two Christianity and Sikhism are radically different in other areas. Christians view the Bible alone as inspired, infallible Scripture, which creates differences between the two faiths. Sikhs and Christians agree that God is one and is the creator and sustainer of the world; but disagree in how God is viewed. While it may be argued that Sikhs are pantheistic the greater difference is how God is seen in comparison of the two faiths. God, in Christianity, is seen as a personal, loving God who is intimately involved in the lives of His children (Psalm 139:2; Romans, 8:15; Galatians 4:6). God is not all or in all because the Bible states that He is separate from creation (Genesis 1:1; John 1:3; Colossians 1:16). Christians view God in terms of a trine Godhead that consists of three distinct Persons that exists as one in essence. Christians believe the second person of the trinity, Jesus, came in body form to earth for the purpose of completing God’s plan of redemption (Matthew 20:28; John 1:1; Philippians 2:7).

Mankind’s greatest problem, according to the Bible, is sin (Isaiah 59:2; Romans 3:23) not Maya. This world is not an illusion obscuring the reality that all is God but is actual and created by God (Genesis 1:31). The only way man can rectify the problem of sin and receive salvation is through Jesus and His substitutionary atonement (Romans 5:8-9:1). Therefore, salvation cannot be obtained through karma and reincarnation, because humans do not have anything good to offer in terms of righteousness and they are only given one life not many (Isaiah 64:6; Hebrews 9:27). Furthermore, a believer’s life in Christ is not contingent on good works; rather good works and clean living are a result of the transformation that has occurred inside them (John 15:5; Romans 12:1-2).

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**Notes**

1 There is no consensus on the founding date. Some scholars date the religion as early as 1450 A.D. because Nanak received his vision at age 28, which would then yield a possible date of 1497/1498 A.D. The Sikh’s official website, sikhs.org, does not give an exact date only giving Nanak’s birthdate.

2 Adi Granth means “First Book;” Granth Sahib means “Master Book.” When Gobind Singh abolished the succession of gurus he named the Adi Granth as the eternal guru.


4 A complete breakdown of the authors can be found at: http://www.sikhs.org/granth2.htm.


8 Guru meaning a teacher and devotee of God.

9 Fieser, 2015, 137.

10 Ibid., 138.


13 Ibid., paragraph 17.


15 Fieser, 2015, 139.


17 Ibid.

18 Robinson, 2014.


22 For further information on these topics visit the Profile section on Watchman Fellowship’s website: http://www.watchman.org/profiles/.


25 Guru Granth Sahib Ji, 1; 45


29 Fieser, 2015, 141.


31 Guru Granth Sahib Ji, 11

32 Guru Granth Sahib Ji, 11

33 Ibid., 1426

34 Ibid., 1427


36 Ibid.