

Sikhism

Background

History

The Indian word Sikh means “student of the truth.” The Sikh faith began in a part of Northern India called the Punjab in the 15th century that is now a part of Pakistan. That period was a time of great tension between the Hindus and Muslims. At that time Northern India was part of the Muslim Mughal Empire, even though the majority of the population was Hindu.

The founder of Sikhism was Guru Nanak who was born into a Hindu family in 1469. That being said, there was a significant Islamic influence on his life.

One day he simply decided to give up his job and began to preach faith in one God that was neither Hindu nor Muslim. He soon gained a large following of people who were attracted by his songs and simple message.

He made his headquarters at Kartarpur in the Punjab, but to spread his message he traveled all over India. Wherever he went he established communities of Sikhs. Over the next several generations, nine more Gurus followed in his footsteps and the faith continued to grow.

There are no more human Sikh Gurus. The designation is now limited to those ten who founded the religion. The last of the ten, Guru Gobind Singh, died in 1708. Before his death, he decreed that from that in the future, the only Guru for all Sikhs would be a collection of hymns and poems which came to be known as the Guru Granth Sahib. Now, all Sikhs follow this eleventh, non-human Guru.

When the British conquered India during their era of colonization, numerous Sikhs became British soldiers and acquired British passports. Upon retirement, many of them chose to move to various parts of the British Empire. There are currently about 18 million Sikhs in India, and a further one or two million worldwide, mainly in Britain, Canada and the United States.

Basic Beliefs and Practices

The most fundamental Sikh belief is that there is only one God. This concept comes from the influence of Islam. The nature of this one God, though, is more in line with Hindu thought. According to their teaching, the name of God is Truth. He is the Creator, is without fear and without hate, is timeless and without form, is beyond death, cannot take human form and can only be known by the grace of the Guru.

When Sikhs speak of the Guru the reference is to God himself – the Great Teacher. God is unknowable without some kind of revelation. This revelation has come through the ten human Gurus who founded the religion and the holy book Shri Guru Granth.

In Sikh theology it is taught that God created everything, so all of life is considered to be good. All creatures have a spirit that is reincarnated to other bodies upon death until the ultimate liberation is achieved. Attachment to material things leads to reincarnation, as well as to the sufferings of birth and death. The goal of Sikhism is to end the cycle of death and rebirth, and to be united with God. This can be accomplished by following the teachings of the Guru, by meditation on the holy name of God, and by performing acts of service and charity. The Sikh's don't consider their religion to be the only way to salvation and people of other religions may also achieve it by their own path.

If a person wishes to become a Sikh, he or she may do so by faithfully believing in:

1. One Immortal Being,
2. The ten Sikh human Gurus,
3. The Guru Granth Sahib (scripture),
4. The utterances and teachings of the ten Gurus, and
5. The baptism passed down by the tenth Guru.
6. It is also necessary not give allegiance to any other religion.

Sikhs emphasize two primary aspects of daily life: service and devotion to God. Service refers to honest work and service to the community. Devotion is cultivated by singing Sikh hymns and meditating on the holy name of God. Sikhism rejects all distinctions of caste, creed, race or sex.

Sikhs consider there to be five cardinal vices – lust, anger, greed, worldly attachment, and pride. It is believed that if a person can overcome these vices they will achieve salvation.

Rituals are considered to be meaningless in the Sikh faith. They reject of all forms of mechanical observances such as fasting, religious vegetarianism, pilgrimages, superstitions, yoga, as well as any form of idol worship. In line with this, they don't believe it is necessary to be celibate or to renounce "the world." They encourage individuals simply to live a normal family life. The emphasis is to live in the world but keep the mind pure. It is considered respectable to earn a living through honest work and they do not approve of begging or getting money by dishonest means.

Sikhs believe that sharing with others is a social responsibility and individuals are expected to help those in need by charitable activity. One part of their charitable service is a free community kitchen which is to be found at every worship center and is open to all people.

There is also a strong belief in the full equality of women, and they reject female infanticide, wife burning, and the practice of women wearing veils. They also allow widows to remarry.

There is an initiation ceremony which is important for those who want to devote themselves to the Sikh way. The Amrit Ceremony was created to initiate faithful Sikhs into the Khalsa order which was created in 1699 by Guru Gobind Singh. The Khalsa baptism ceremony is understood to be part of an individual's personal spiritual development. A believer accepts this baptism when he or she is ready to fully live up to the high expectations of the Sikh faith. All Sikhs are expected to be Khalsa, or at least be working towards it.

Essential Beliefs

God

Sikhs believe in a single, formless God with many names who can be known through meditation. God's name is Truth and he is the Creator, is without fear and hate, is timeless and without form, is beyond death, cannot take human form and can only be known by the grace of the Guru.

Man

Man is a life form that is seeking oneness with God. This oneness occurs when an individual is able to completely disengage from worldly attachments. Typically this happens over the course of many incarnations.

Salvation

Salvation is enlightenment which is granted by God's grace and results in liberation from the cycles of death and rebirth followed by the soul's merger with God. The means for achieving this liberation is by prayer, meditation, singing praise to God, baptism into the Khalsa brotherhood, good works, good morality, obeying God's laws, and purifying the soul of impurities which have been accumulated over prior lifetimes. One can only achieve liberation after achieving human form, and the soul goes through many cycles of births and deaths in lower forms before finally achieving human form.

Faith Foundation

1. What is the most fundamental reality? (Ultimate reality)

God Almighty is an impersonal, formless ultimate reality. He is the Creator, personal savior, inner teacher, and is omniscient, omnipotent, and immaterial. God reveals and manifests Himself through everything in the universe but, since he is infinite, no finite form can be worshiped. God chose to embody the Divine Light in the Guru Nanak and the other nine gurus successively, and finally in the scriptures themselves, but none are to be worshiped as gods.

2. What is the nature of our material reality? (Material reality)

The Sikh view is that spirit and matter are not opposed to one another. The material universe is God's creation and operates within his divine will. Its origin is unknowable for humanity.

Before he created the material universe, God existed in deep meditation within the void for countless ages. At some point he decided to create the material universe and life. Every creature in this world, every plant, and every form is a manifestation of the Creator. God alone knows the reasons for and the moment of earth's creation. Having created this universe and the world, God directs and watches over all actions that take place within it with care and kindness. He does this as a benign, supportive parent.

The chasm between the material and the spiritual is in the minds of humans only. It is a limitation of the human condition that spirit and matter appear as a duality, and their unity is not self-evident.

3. What is a human being? (Humanity)

Man is a life form that is seeking oneness with God. This oneness occurs when an individual is able to completely detach from worldly attachments and escape the cycle of deaths and rebirths. Typically this happens over the course of many incarnations.

The primary emphasis in Sikhism is on mastery over, and the discovery of, the self. To do this, one must recognize the divine spark within oneself, see it in others, cherish it, then nurture and fulfill it. Humans have the capability to further their spiritual progression through conscious choice. The primary way to do this is by spiritual discipline, meditation, prayer, and sharing.

4. What happens to a person at death? (Death)

Sikhs acknowledge the repetitive cycle of birth, life and death, karma (the accumulation of good and bad deeds), and reincarnation. Each individual is understood to have many reincarnations on the path to unity with God. Being born a human means the soul is nearing the end of rebirth. God judges each soul at death and may either reincarnate the soul or, if pure enough, allow it to rest with him."

5. Why is it possible to know anything at all? (Knowledge)

Man has the capacity for knowledge because the life form (the soul) was created by God with that capability. That being said, knowledge of reality (God) cannot be gained without knowing the will of God and carrying it out. God is not an object of knowledge, rather is an expression of it. The action of carrying out God's will is as important as the knowledge itself. The knowledge comes from Guru Granth Sahib (scripture).

6. How do we know what is right and wrong? (Morality)

The guiding principles of Sikhism are found in Guru Granth Sahib (scripture).

7. What is the meaning of human history? (History)

History is a series of deaths and rebirths. The ultimate goal is for individual life forms to escape the material realm where time exists and unite with God where time is a meaningless concept.

Authority

The Holy Granth (Guru Granth Sahib) consists of hymns and writings by the first nine Gurus, along with religious texts from different Muslim and Hindu saints. The tenth guru assembled his writings separately into a number of other books. The Shri Guru Granth is considered to be the holiest religious text and is referred to as the 11th and final Guru. These holy books are the ultimate source of authority and doctrine in Sikhism.

Evidence for the Authority

There is no independent evidence that the teachings of Sikhism is true. It was put forth by the early leaders of the religion as true and is asserted to be so by those who followed.

Much of the belief system also has foundations in Hinduism. As such it has many of the same problems as other Far Eastern religious thought. Specifically, the teaching relies on personal experience of its adherents for its validation. Unfortunately, much of this perceived experience does not match up with the way human beings experience life on this planet.