

Sikhism

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Introduction

Note on terminology

The overall title of this essay is 'Sikhism' as a most widely recognized term. It is used by the GCSE and most textbooks.

However we use the term 'Sikhi' within this text and in other resources on the website, as a more accurate name for the beliefs and life of Sikh people. The word 'Sikhism' was coined by the British Raj, it was not a term Sikhs used themselves. Author Arvind-Pal Singh Mandair describes the term as a 'colonial construct' (A Singh Mandair, 2013: p. 5). The word 'Sikh' comes from the Punjabi verb 'Sikhana', meaning 'to learn'. Thus a 'Sikh' is one who learns. The term 'Sikhi' as opposed to 'Sikhism' implies a continuous state of learning and engagement, rather than a box into which people can be placed. Sikhi is not an 'ism', it is a way of life.

For now the terms 'Sikhism' and 'Sikhi' will be used interchangeably in Religious Education and in wider culture. However in time 'Sikhi' may become the preferred term.

Reference: Singh Mandair, A (2013) *Sikhism: a Guide for the Perplexed*, Bloomsbury, London

Sikhi is founded upon the life and teaching of Guru Nanak Dev Ji and nine successive gurus who lived in the northern part of South Asia between the fifteenth and eighteenth centuries. Sikhi is a worldwide religion with nearly 30 million adherents which is about 1% of the world's population.

The resources contained in this essay are a basic introduction to the facts and beliefs of Sikhi. They are a portal or window into the world of Sikhi and by following the websites and bibliographies, an enquirer may discover more and more about this faith.

The six units are based on the QCA non-statutory framework for Religious Education and the Areas of Enquiry. They provide not only a comprehensive guide to the factual and belief structures of Sikhi, but also address the issues that Sikhi encounters as it engages with the 21st century.

About the Author

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Ranvir Singh is Head of RE and Citizenship Coordinator at Cranford Community College. He has been involved with 'interfaith' issues for many years having given talks at the International Interfaith Centre, Oxford, the Next Generation at the Parliament of World Religions in Cape Town, meeting the Dalai Lama, joining the executive of the World Congress of Faiths, helping organise the 'Faith in Action' programme at the Sacred Space at the Rio+10 UN Summit on Sustainable Development at Johannesburg, and attending the Millennium Summit of Religious Leaders at the United Nations. He is passionate that RE can provide insights into how young people can influence the world around them.

Beliefs, Teachings, Wisdom, Authority

Interpreting teachings, sources, authorities and ways of life in order to understand religions and beliefs;

Understanding and responding critically to beliefs and attitudes.

Basic Beliefs

Sikhs believe that God loves humans and reaches out to all humans through Grace – gurprasad or True Guru. Therefore, the proper religious practice is to respond to God through prayer and/or song. Since God reaches out to all humans, everyone is equal and religious identity is meaningless. If humans choose God and live a God-centred life they will join with God in the afterlife. If humans have centred their energies on something else, Sikhs believe they will suffer in heavens and hells before returning to the cycle of rebirth and will roam through species till they again receive the opportunity of human life.

The Guru Granth Sahib Ji is a collection of the hymns of six of the human Gurus and 36 mystics from a variety of religious traditions including Islam and Hinduism. Sikhs also follow the historical practice of the ten human Gurus who lived between 1469 and 1708. In particular, they follow the example of the final human Guru who instituted the Khalsa.

Sikh practice should be based on the teachings in the Guru Granth Sahib, examples from the life of the human Gurus, and the Code of Conduct of the Khalsa (Rahit Maryada).

Distinctive features of Sikhi include the equality of women and men, no priesthood, inclusion of writings from members of different religions in the sacred text and belief in 1 Unborn God (Judaism and Islam) combined with belief in rebirth, samsara, the Void and the Middle Way (Buddhism).

Individual Sikhs feel confidence in a Being that loves and supports them – they are fundamentally 'ok' – and show tolerance and curiosity in the culture and beliefs of others. As a community Sikhs have championed progressive social, political and economic change in India due to the teachings on equality, democratic decision-making (the Khalsa), the dignity of labour and the importance of sharing and social justice. Having no priesthood has led to difficulties in transmission of the religion to younger generations, particularly in the West, but at the same time makes possible fresh interpretations of the tradition that have contributed to successful integration of the Sikh Diaspora into host communities around the world.

The Scriptures and Authority

The sacred text known as the Guru Granth Sahib Ji is the most important source of authority for all Sikhs. Second, Sikhs will look to the Sikh Rahit Maryada or Code of Conduct developed and re-developed by the Khalsa. Third, they will re-consider the practice of the Gurus which are collected in Janam Sakhis or 'life stories'.

1. The Guru Granth Sahib Ji can be translated as the 'Respected Guru Folio'. 'Sahib' means 'respected' and a 'folio' is simply a large bound book. It is a chorus of praise for God. There are 36 authors in addition to six Gurus.

Guru Nanak Dev Ji (1469-1539 CE) collected the writings of mystics from different traditions that had predated him. Their writings along with his own were handed to his successor. This is suggested by the evidence that later Gurus have used phrases from or commented on phrases in the writings of previous authors. The collection was then arranged according to ragas or Indian musical measures by Guru Arjan Dev Ji in 1604. He collected the preachings of six gurus and two non-Sikhs.

Guru Gobind Singh Ji (1708 CE) completed the work and declared that the Granth would be his successor and so became the Guru Granth Sahib Ji, or 'Holy Book, Guru'. Thus the text became the permanent authority or Eternal Guru of the Sikhs. The writings bear witness to the spiritual experiences of people from different religious traditions across five centuries of South Asian history – twelfth to seventeenth centuries.

The Guru Granth Sahib Ji does not contain stories but covers both religious and social subjects, such as devotion to God, the importance of the Guru and the need to be pure, as well as breaking down the caste system, service to others and family life. The most sacred section of the Guru Granth Sahib Ji is the Mool Mantar which encapsulates Sikh beliefs.

There is one God

Eternal Truth is His name:

The Creator, devoid of fear and hatred

Immortal, unborn, self-existent,

Great and bountiful ...

2. The Sikh Rahit Maryada, the Code of Conduct, was announced at the Akal Takht which is part of the Golden Temple complex in Amritsar. If clarification is required for the Code of Conduct, or a new issue has emerged, the mukhi (mouthpiece) of the Akal Takht will call a meeting to which all Sikhs may attend. The consensus decision reached will be announced from the Akal Takht.

Sikhs may choose to ignore provisions of the Sikh Rahit Maryada. This is because they might feel that a mistake was made. However, Sikhs do not defy the authority of the Akal Takht which would be the same as defying the authority of the Khalsa, which is the organization set up and joined by the last human Guru.

3. The stories connected with the Gurus exist in texts called janam sakhis or life stories. The stories show how the Gurus are regarded as being guided by God, at one with the Divine Light, forms of the Formless, visualizations of God in the same way as one can see a cow in a calf.

The most significant complementary texts are the writings of Bhai Gurdas which are regarded as a basic summary of the main themes of the Guru Granth Sahib Ji. There were also texts written by the poets of the court of Guru Gobind Singh Ji. They wrote a range of texts, including the Diwan-i-Goya.

Founders of Faith

For Sikhs the Ten Gurus are the foundation of Sikhi and the main sources of Sikh inspiration. The Gurus are considered by Sikhs to be spiritually perfect and morally correct.

Sikhi began with the teachings of Guru Nanak Dev Ji (1469-1539), who came from Talwandi, near Lahore (now Pakistan). Nanak's teachings were composed in the context of, but distinguished from, the Hinduism and Islam of his day.

Guru Nanak, also known as the First Great Master, emphasised meditation on the Word of God (Naam Japna) and taught that all human beings were equal, regardless of caste or creed. As well as preaching against prejudice and unjust discrimination, he put his words into action by starting the institution of the langar, where people sit together to eat without any distinction.

He was followed by nine further Great Masters:

- Guru Angad (1504-1552)
- Guru Amar Das (1479-1574)
- Guru Ram Das (1534-1581)
- Guru Arjan (1563-1606)
- Guru Hargobind (1595-1644)
- Guru Har Rai (1630-1661)
- Guru Harkrishnan (1656-1664)
- Guru Tegh Bahadur (1621-1675)
- The final human Guru, Guru Gobind Rai (1666-1708) formed the Khalsa and was renamed Guru Gobind Singh Ji. Sikhs today continue to follow his example in joining the Khalsa.

The final Guru is the holy text of the Guru Granth Sahib Ji itself (see 'The Scriptures and Authority' above).

An Exemplar of Faith

Although the Ten Gurus are regarded by Sikhs as the template for all things spiritual, some Sikhs have become internationally renowned for their work and spiritual advice. One such is Puran Singh (1904-1992). Puran Singh worked tirelessly for the poor since the Partition of India in 1947. He received the highest national civilian award in India and the institution he founded continues to collect funds from around the world. Through humble service for the poor and destitute, through the return of his civilian award following the attack on the Golden Temple, through raising awareness about soil erosion and encouraging the planting of trees, Puran Singh has shown the spiritual way for other Sikhs. However, Puran Singh also focused on helping the poor of all faiths during periods of communal violence for almost half a century. He demonstrated that service may be more powerful than politics. He showed that love for all people is greater than hate for some of them. His environmental focus was ahead of its time. The idea of service of the poor is for all times. He was inspired to become a Sikh as a result of receiving langar – free food in a free kitchen and he contrasted the simple act of receiving langar with his previous experience of feeding brahmins and receiving nothing.

Ways of Living

Exploring the impact of religions and beliefs on how people live their lives;

Understanding and responding critically to beliefs and attitudes.

Guidance for Life

Sikhs consider that beliefs must translate into action as matter must be energized, maya must be charged with the Naam, the phenomenal world transformed by spiritual experience with the numinous, a fully, naturally human life.

Sikhs feel that it is essential to dissuade people from rituals based on the idea that God is mean, and encourage people to experiment with the Generous Reality.

Sikhs believe that God is not limited to one people, religion or language. Therefore, there should not be boundaries as we are all part of one humanity – there are no outsiders.

Regarding the martyrdom of the Ninth Guru (Guru Tegh Bahadur Ji 1621-1675) for leading a non-violent political campaign, Sikh scripture says that:

Tegh Bahadur broke the mortal vessel of his body by striking it at the head of the Emperor of Delhi and retreated to his 'Original Abode', the God. Truly incomparable is this great deed done to assert and protect three basic human rights: the first, to secure for everyone the liberty to worship; the second, to uphold the inviolable dignity of every person's private and personal point of contact with God and their right to observe dharma, what they conceive as basic principles of cosmic or individual existence, and the third to uphold every good person's imprescriptible right to pursue their own vision of happiness and self-fulfilment (Dasam Granth, 54).

Regarding the organization of society:

Henceforth: such is the Will of God: No one shall coerce another, no one shall exploit another Everyone, each individual, has the inalienable birth-right to seek and pursue happiness and self-fulfilment. Love and persuasion is the only law of social coherence (Guru Granth Sahib Ji: 74).

Sikhs have an active obligation to disobey any law that violates these principles, e.g. Guru Nanak Dev Ji breaking a ban on music in Baghdad, Guru Hargobind Ji commanding Sikhs to bear arms and ride horses in violation of Islamic law on dhimmitude.

Sikhs believe that progress in the world will be based on the spiritual sovereignty of the individual.

Religious Practice

The status of the Guru Granth Sahib Ji is shown by its being placed in the Gurdwara, on a throne (palki) supported by cushions (gaddis) under a canopy (chanani) in the royal court (diwan) which is the 'prayer room' for Sikhs. While the court is in session / services are taking place, there is always an attendant (granthi) waving a fan (chauri) over it. It is always carried over the head and, often, has a special room where it is kept at night. In the court people are not allowed to turn their back to the scripture and no one can sit at the same level.

In worship in the gurdwara, Sikhs always bow before the Guru Granth Sahib Ji. It is kept covered with a piece of silk called a romalla. except when being read. The Guru Granth Sahib Ji has the central position in the Gurdwara. During worship, a person will sit behind the Guru Granth Sahib Ji holding a chauri as a sign of respect.

Hymns are sung from the Guru Granth Sahib Ji and it is treated as the ruler of the Sikhs, seated on a throne in the court room of the gurdwara. Personal copies of the Guru Granth Sahib Ji are few as each copy must have a room set aside to house it. This is because Sikhs honour it so highly.

The status of the Khalsa is shown by the panj piare (five representatives of the Khalsa) taking a lead position in Sikh religious affairs, for example, processions.

Reading and Interpreting the Scriptures

The language of the Guru Granth Sahib Ji is in the Gurmukhi script but it also contains words from other languages such as Hindustani and Sanskrit. The Gurus aimed at making mysticism accessible to general masses but there are specific mystic terms from a range of traditions – Buddhist, Hindu and Muslim.

The texts of previous mystics were collected by Guru Nanak Dev Ji and he added his own hymns to the collections. These were passed down through a succession of Gurus till they were collected in a single volume, a granth. This text is called the Adi Granth and was compiled by Guru Arjun Dev Ji in 1604. The original manuscript still exists and is kept at Kartapur, in the Punjab, Northern India. Later, the writings of the Ninth Guru were added and the text known as the Guru Granth Sahib Ji was finalized in 1708.

The most significant complementary texts are the writings of Bhai Gurdas which are regarded as a basic summary of the main themes of the Guru Granth Sahib Ji. There were also texts written by the poets of the court of Guru Gobind Singh Ji. They had been dismissed by the Emperor Aurangzeb as he regarded poetry as un-Islamic. They took residence with the Guru and wrote a range of texts, including the Diwan-i-Goya. Some maintain that they also wrote many or all of the texts that have been collected in what is today called the Dasam Granth, although other Sikhs maintain that some or even all of these poems were written by Guru Gobind Singh Ji.

Some commentators interpret the language of these texts within the structure of Islamic, Hindu or Buddhist thought, while others see it as metaphorical and mythological. For example, some groups within Sikhi use literal interpretations of heaven and hell while others regard these as metaphors. Some groups use tradition as a guide to practice while others argue that it is important to continue to re-apply the principles to situations in the present.

Analysis is always from a perspective, a lens. Therefore, no commentator assumes that their understanding is perfect largely because the text is a dialogue between different mystics and God, the mystics among themselves and between the soul and God.

The Journey of Life

The four rites of passage in a Sikh life are birth, amrit or initiation, marriage and death.

Following the birth of a baby, a mother takes her child and karah parshad to the Gurdwara where it is prepared and a thanksgiving ceremony performed, during which some amrit (sugar and water) is placed on the baby's lips. The Guru Granth Sahib Ji is opened at random and the first letter of the first hymn will be used as the initial letter of the baby's name.

Initiation is extremely significant for Sikhs and usually takes place on physical maturity. For boys, five elder Sikhs lead the ceremony which involves stirring amrit in a bowl with a khanda before having it sprinkled in their eyes and hair. It is at this point that a young male Sikh can adopt the 5Ks – Kesh, Kangha, Kara, Kachera and Kirpan.

It is expected that a Sikh man will marry a Sikh woman. Often marriages are arranged and there is an engagement. Marriages are performed in the Gurdwara and the four marriage vows (Lavan) are read from the Guru Granth Sahib Ji.

The hymn sung at a funeral is the same as one sung before bedtime. The reason may be that death is little more than a sleep before we awaken to a new world and that sleep is a small death in which we can glimpse the preoccupations of our life.

Sikhs can either cremate or bury the body (particularly at sea); the main thing is to treat it respectfully. There is belief in heavens and hells to reward goodness and punish evil. Following these experiences a person may have another opportunity to achieve freedom from self-centredness and self-doubt and live in acknowledgement of God. The Gurus use names and ideas common to different traditions, e.g. Azrael for the angel of death and the bridge over hell (Islam), nirvana (Buddhism) and various Hindu deities.

According to Kanwar Ranvir Singh, 1999, *100 Questions and Answers about Sikhism*:

Each ceremony combines the mysteries and impulses of death and sex. The naming of the new-born infant by the Guru Granth Sahib Ji and the parents is a puzzle to the labours of love the soul will be involved in before it departs once more. Pahul involves accepting death (offering your head) for spiritual re-birth with new parents in the House of the Guru.

The true marriage of a Sikh is the marriage between the soul and the Spirit. The Lavan refers to this ascent in the four rounds. The path to God is not from A to B. For God is not apart from us.

The spiritual journey is from the nightmare-phantasy of the ego to the beautiful reality of the here-and-now. "Wherever I see, there I see You." It starts and ends in the same place, yet each time you are standing in a different experience because of the round. Therefore, the circuit around the Guru is used, rather than a straight walk. For a Sikh, it is not the case that God is not here, but is there. Rather, God is everywhere. The two humans re-enact a play of this spiritual journey. The Groom leads for the Gurbani usually signifies God as the personal Groom and the Guru-Sikh as the bride. The Gurus adopt the voice of the bride, the seeker, but also, In Truth, the sought. Yet the couple are not just acting a play. They are making a commitment to this journey by enacting it – they are taking their first steps together. About human relations, the Guru comments that "only those are married who are One Spirit in two bodies." Without making this journey to the One the centre of their life path together (just as Guru Granth Sahib Ji sits at the centre of their marriage rite), they cannot be One. Rather the egos will always drive them into a wild dance, together and apart. The Anand Karaj is equally about spiritual union between soul and Spirit, the affirmation of physical life – sex leading to new life within this committed mini-sadhsangat, the physical-spiritual foundation of the Guru Khalsa Panth, but also the death of ego, which is a prerequisite for physical and spiritual wedding.

Finally, the death prayer is Kirtan Sohila, which is also our bedtime prayers each day. It lasts only two to three minutes. There is a link between sleep and death, the smaller rest and the greater. The important point is that the first of the prayers which comprise the Sohila is about the marriage day, between soul and Spirit. When will that day, i.e. day of death and marriage come?

Holy Days and Celebrations

Because Sikhi has strong historic and present day links with Hinduism and the Punjab region of India, the Hindu calendar is generally used to fix the Sikh festival year. Since people were already gathered together on these days, the Gurus decided to use these occasions to preach their message. Gurpurbs is the term to describe days connected with the lives of the Gurus but there are also melas. Melas (fairs) were traditional Hindu celebrations.

Gurpurbs:

- Birthday of Guru Nanak Dev Ji – November. The birth of Guru Nanak Dev Ji marks the beginning of the religion, although the reverence of the Naam that he promotes goes back to the "first breath".
- Birthday of Guru Gobind Singh Ji – 5th January. The birth of the last human Guru.
- Martyrdom of Guru Arjun Dev Ji – 16th June. In addition to Nagar keertan (street procession) and Akhand path (continuous

reading of Guru Granth Sahib Ji), – Guru Arjun Dev Ji's martyrdom is commemorated by Sikhs having stalls offering free drinks to passers-by. This recalls the original events when Guru Hargobind Ji offered the Sikhs sweet drinks to calm down after the execution of Guru Arjun Dev Ji, the first Sikh martyr.

– Martyrdom of Guru Tegh Bahadur Ji – 24th November.

Akhand paths (the continuous reading of the Guru Granth Sahib Ji) take place during the gurburbs. Sikhs try to attend the gurdwara during this period with the final day of the meeting falling on the day of the festival.

Different hymns are sung on the birth of Guru Nanak Dev Ji and Guru Gobind Singh Ji and the martyrdom of Guru Tegh Bahadur Ji.

Melas:

– Baisakhi – 14 April – birth of the Khalsa, which is the Sikh community but also the living Guru, the Guru Khalsa. Baisakhi is marked by amrit ceremonies as it is the most popular time of year for people to join the Khalsa.

– Hola Mohalla – marked by martial arts competitions.

– Diwali – October/November – release of Guru Hargobind Ji as a prisoner of conscience – celebrated with fireworks.

Ways of Expressing Meaning

Appreciating that individuals and cultures express their beliefs and values through many different forms;

The key writings of Sikhi are those of the Gurus are by the Gurus.

Stories of Faith

The stories of significance for Sikh faith are contained within the Guru Granth Sahib Ji and the Janam Sakhis or 'life stories' of the Gurus. Without these texts there would be no record of what the Gurus had said.

At one level they contain the teachings of God (revelation); at another they contain commentaries of the writings of other Gurus and mystics (philosophical dialogue); at another the Guru Granth Sahib Ji is a mirror reflecting the Shabad which is the Divine-in-humanity. This Shabad is the Word spoken at the beginning of the world and which is the Jot or Light that lights all beings:

Amongst all is the Light – You are that Light. By this Illumination, that Light is radiant within all. Through the Guru's Teachings, the Light shines forth (Guru Granth Sahib Ji: 13).

Individual Sikhs and the community treat the texts as revelation guiding them to God and/or as a series of philosophical commentaries on religious experience and/or as a Living Embodiment of the Shabad.

Symbols of Faith

Sikh symbols are seen as gateways that point to Reality.

A most important symbol for Sikhs is the Nishan Sahib – the flag that is flown at every gurdwara. This is made up of a blue or black Khanda on a yellow or orange background.

The Khanda is made up of three weapons – a chakra (quoit – as used by Xena, warrior princess! – which stands for God's Infinity, without beginning and without end); a Khanda (double-edged sword – which stands for God's power of justice and mercy, or creation and destruction, the double edge of God's Names); and two kirpans (swords of mercy – which stand for meeri-peeri (worldly and spiritual power).

The Panj Kakke is the 5Ks. Panj means 'five' and kakke means words starting with the Punjabi letter for 'k' – hence, they are called the 5ks. All members of the Khalsa – female as well as male – must wear them.

The five Ks have both spiritual meanings and form a uniform for the Khalsa. The taking of the five Ks is intended to create a saint as well as a soldier, a sant-sipahi (saint-soldier). This reflects the Sikh belief in meeri-peeri (worldly as well as spiritual power). The transformation of the five Ks is both individual (for the person who has joined the Khalsa) and collective (as it forms a uniform):

1. Kesh means 'uncut hair' and reflects detachment or freedom from worldly fashions. Uncut hair is common to many different spiritual traditions – Native Americans, Rastafarians, Nazarenes, Taoists, Hindu rishis.
2. Kangha means 'comb' and reflects the idea that detachment should be balanced with social responsibilities such as cleanliness. Life should be physically, mentally and spiritually pure. Some of those with uncut hair did not clean it since they had left society to focus on God.
3. Kara means 'bracelet' and reflects the infinity of God – without beginning or end – that works through human beings, on their right wrist.
4. Kachera are 'breeches' or long shorts. They cover the private parts, therefore, showing the importance of social order. They also allow people to be active unlike many of the previous types of clothing.
5. Kirpan means 'sword of mercy'. It is a weapon showing that the Khalsa is a soldier as well as a saint. It is a weapon worn by a knight – hence the surnames Singh for men meaning 'Lion' and Kaur for women meaning 'princess' – who must use it 'with mercy' to ensure freedom and justice.

Creative Expression

Sikh aesthetics have focused on music where the hymns of the Guru Granth Sahib Ji are played and sung. Guru Nanak Dev Ji wrote over 900 hymns and in order for these to be used in worship, they are arranged as ragas or musical measurements so they can be recited to music.

Many people interpret the language of the Guru Granth Sahib Ji symbolically since the Gurus have imposed layers of words on reality, demonstrating that language cannot directly approach the Real. For example, the term 'yamas' has been used for the gods of death which is found in Hinduism, but the name Azrael has also been used, who is the angel of death in Islam and is also, perhaps, mentioned in the Book of Tobit. A literalist might wonder what the 'real' name and nature of these beings that gather the dead actually is.

Sikhi rejects any form of idol worship including worship of pictures of the Gurus. Although some of the Gurus did pose for paintings, none of these historical paintings has survived. Any subsequent paintings of the Gurus are considered to be for inspirational purposes only and should not be regarded as objects of worship themselves.

Architecture

The Harimandir Sahib (Golden Temple) was built at a lower level than the city of Amritsar that was constructed around it, symbolizing that religion should serve humanity. Also, it was surrounded by a pool which enabled people of all castes and races to drink together. Within the complex is a langar where people can eat together and serve each other. There are four doors symbolizing openness to all people.

Within all gurdwaras the most important rooms are the langar and the diwan (literally, court) where the Guru Granth Sahib sits on a throne underneath a canopy and is attended by a person waving a whisk. Sikhs bow before the Ruler and make an offering that will be of practical use in supporting a republic of goodness under the guidance of the Word. They sit at a lower level and never turn their back on the Ruler. These protocols reinforce the message sent by the design of the diwan.

There are historic gurdwaras associated with different episodes in the lives of the Gurus.

Expressing Faith through Worship

For Sikhs, attending the Gurdwara fulfils a basic human need to worship, to recognize the fire within the wood of our being.

Sikh sentiments are contained in the following verses:

'The earth has been set up as a dharamsal, a place for righteousness' and 'the saints of different worlds' (Guru Granth Sahib Ji: 7-8).

These material worlds are spaces where the Spirit let to be allowed to shine through the veil of shame and filth that is the ego. However, the traditional place of worship for Sikhs, is the Gurdwara. This means Guru's door. A Gurdwara is not only a place of worship, it is also a centre for the community. Outside will be found a flag, the Nishan Sahib with the Sikh symbol placed on it. Inside, there will be found a worship area with a throne or takht at the centre. This is a platform for the Guru Granth Sahib Ji.

The Guru Granth Sahib Ji is treated as the ruler of the Sikh's life. Therefore, it is placed on a throne under a canopy with an attendant waving a fan over it. Sikhs bow to it and must never turn their back to the ruler.

A verse occurs three times in the Guru Granth Sahib Ji – in the morning and evening prayers and in the main text also. It discusses planets, fire, water, Buddhas, angels, gods, goddesses and saints praising God.

Worshippers always take off their shoes when entering a Gurdwara. They also bow or prostrate themselves before the Guru Granth Sahib Ji. During worship which may last up to five hours, worshippers (the sadhsangat) sit cross-legged on carpeted floors. Hymn singing or ragas, sermons and prayers alternate during the course of the devotions. There are no priests in Sikhi so anyone may read the Guru Granth Sahib Ji.

At the end of devotions a worshipper receives karah parshad, a sweet mixture of flour, semolina and butter, to indicate equality before God. As it is important to feed the physical as well as the spiritual body, food is prepared in the langar (kitchen) and worshippers have food during the course of the day.

Pilgrimage

Pilgrimage is condemned by the Gurus; the real pilgrimage is to God who lives in the heart. However, many Sikhs will visit Amritsar in the Punjab and the Golden Temple in order to identify with the historic roots of their faith.

For Sikhs, all space is holy since God lives everywhere. When Guru Nanak Dev Ji visited Makkah he had his feet towards the Ka'bah. When Muslims objected that he had pointed his feet towards the House of God he asked them to point his feet to where God did not live. All time is holy since God has been true from the beginning, is true now, and will always be true.

Identity, Diversity and Belonging

Understanding how individuals develop a sense of identity and belonging through faith or belief;

Exploring the variety, difference and relationships that exist within and between religions, values and beliefs.

Foundations of Identity and Belonging

Practising Sikhs visit the gurdwara often and may wear the 5Ks of the Khalsa – the kesh (uncut hair), kara (bracelet), kirpan (sword), kachera (breeches) and kangha (comb). Joining the Khalsa is the most obvious way of showing commitment to the Guru. It is an act of active discipleship. Sikhs commit to saying daily prayers, avoiding four taboos and behaviour expected of a son/daughter of Guru Gobind Singh Ji and Mata Sahib Kaur.

Religious / Spiritual Identity

For Sikhs, joining the Khalsa and receiving amrit demonstrates the relationship between belief and action.

When a Sikh joins the Khalsa they leave behind their previous identity and take the new surnames, 'Singh' for men and 'Kaur' for women. The Khalsa becomes their new family.

For the individual they commit themselves to something beyond themselves, they actively commit to following the Guru. For the community it means continuity.

Sikhs are expected to live according to the threefold golden path – acknowledging and remembering God at all times and places, earning an honest living and sharing.

For a Sikh this can be sensed in terms of a godly personality.

If a Sikh has joined the Khalsa they will have the 5Ks. If not, Divine qualities will be present in them 'just as a cow is visible in a calf'.

Morally, a Sikh will have control over the emotions of anger, lust, pride, greed and losing yourself in dear ones. The Gurus provide the exemplars for living a good life.

The energies Sikhs call virtues belong to God and are a gift from God.

Since, for Sikhs, the goal is to develop a relationship with God, everything is personal. No one else can know what sort of relationship any two persons have.

Sikhs believe that each person is unique as their track way across life is unique. All humans have the opportunity to enjoy a relationship with God and from that vantage point humans can have a particular relationship.

Haumai or 'Am I-ness?' is the fundamental problem. Doubt leads people to fear and from there to self-centredness. This is the key problem of a manmukh or self-centred person. However, Sikhs believe that the real origin of the self is that it has been made by God and contains the Divine imprint or Shabad. This Shabad or Word is God and is the reason why God is with and in all people. The Shabad is called the alchemist's stone that can turn a person from lead to gold.

The Gurus taught that finally everything turns to God as sparks return to the fire, or waves return to the ocean. Each drop has its own unique relationship to the ocean and this play of union and separation from God is the basis of the Sikh's Grace-filled and loving relationship: 'God never abandons us and we always seek Him'.

Amongst Sikhs there is a sense of optimism and Divine support for the future and people develop a sense of themselves through a personal examination of the past.

Family and Community

The Gurus taught that people should live in families. Nine of the ten human Gurus were married and had families. Sadhsangat or fellowship is also very important as this is regarded as the source of values, emotional support and intellectual guidance for the spiritual journey.

Sikh parents encourage their children to take part in the four rites of passage (see Practices and ways of life > 'The Journey of life'). They will also perform the Nitnem or daily prayers and attend the gurdwara frequently.

Practice may involve a range of daily, weekly and monthly programmes in the local gurdwara and, sometimes, across gurdwaras.

The impact on the community occurs during processions marking important dates in the Sikh calendar. Free food and drink is made available to non-Sikhs as well as Sikhs along the route of the procession. The langar is open for free food and serves an important community need for certain people as well as Sikhs.

Sikhs regard their private beliefs as personal and do not seek to convert other people. The challenge is to live an authentic life and that challenge has been unchanged from the past to the present and will remain unchanged in the future.

Sikh Diversity

There are Sikhs by belief and Sikhs by birth. A Sikh's belief is defined in article one of the Sikh Rahit Maryada (Code of Conduct). However, there are people who would identify themselves as Sikhs but who may not believe in the religion. It was in recognition of this distinction that Sikhs successfully lobbied for paragraph 67 of the 2001 UN Declaration against Racism which takes note of the multiple bases of identity.

Within mainstream Sikhi there is the unifying belief in the Guru Granth Sahib Ji and the Guru Khalsa Panth (Khalsa). Variant groups that exist are the Namdharis and the Nirankaris who believe in a living human Guru. Combined, these groups number in excess of ten thousand.

Within the community there are different attitudes towards the Khalsa. Some regard the Khalsa as an ideal and choose not to join it. Others differ over interpretations of the Sikh Rahit Maryada (Code of Conduct) and follow what they regard as a more traditional line (for example, Akhand Keertanee Jatha and Damdami Taksal) or the interpretations of a holy person (Sant Baba).

Other Religions & Beliefs

Sikhs welcome inter-faith dialogue as it can be argued that Guru Nanak Dev Ji was engaged in it hundreds of years ago. The Guru Granth Sahib Ji contains the record of his debate with the Siddhas (a group of Buddhists) and the accounts of his life (Janem Sakhis) discuss his meetings with Hindus and Muslims. His collection of the hymns of saints from a variety of traditions now contained in the Guru Granth Sahib Ji, provision of free vegetarian food to all (langar), and insistence that people of any faith could know God meant that inter-faith worship has always been a part of Sikh worship. This is symbolized by the foundation stone of the Harmandir Sahib (Golden Temple) being laid by a Muslim saint, Mian Mir.

Sikhs have welcomed the modern world of religious pluralism, challenge to religious myth and ritual and the emergence of humanism since these values are inherent within the tradition.

Of all religions, the best religion is to practice Naam (Name of God) and to do pious deeds (truthful living). Of all rites, the best rite is to remove the filth of soul by association with the saints (spirituals – pure ones). Of all efforts, the best effect is to, ever, heartily utter the Name of God. Of all speeches, the ambrosial speech (Amritbani) is to hear God's praise and to repeat it with the tongue. Of all places, that heart (soul) is the best place wherein dwell the Name of God, O Nanak (Guru Granth Sahib Ji: 266).

Meaning, Purpose and Truth

Exploring some of the ultimate questions that confront humanity, and responding imaginatively to them;

The ups, downs and meaning(s) of life's journey.

Religious Experience

For Sikhs, religious experience is the only basis for religious claims. Since these are available to everyone, all humans are considered to be equal and there is no place for priests.

The source of all spiritual experience for Sikhs, is God Himself. For Sikhs, God is seen as a missing dimension of our everyday lives. Nine gates give us sensory impressions of maya but we need to open the Tenth Gate to experience God in our lives and to be authentic or real.

Sikh faith is not about partisan doctrine or debate but the universal human experience and relationship. Rather, feelings are the evidence of faith.

These feelings form the basis of personally informed discussion within the sadhsangat or fellowship. They are also tuned by the Gurbani or sacred song which is organized into 31 ragas or measures of South Asian music that each reflect a particular emotional mood / state of mind.

Feelings and beliefs are experiences that are meaningful to an individual. Sikhs consider that it is not necessary to justify this to any other person whether for reasons of faith or science. An intimate relationship cannot easily be discussed. The Gurus use a variety of terms for God including mother, father, brother, childhood friend, friend and lover. Gwen Griffith-Dickson in her study of the philosophy of religious experience points out, for instance, that people's reports of sexual experiences will be different and often contradictory. A scientific description of the event will not explain what it feels like or what it means to have one.

Religious practices are only valid if they encourage a spiritual experience:

Of all religions, the best religion is to chant the Name of the Lord and maintain pure conduct. Of all religious rituals, the most sublime ritual is to erase the filth of the dirty mind in the Company of the Holy. Of all efforts, the best effort is to chant the Name of the Lord in the heart, forever. Of all speech, the most ambrosial speech is to hear the Lord's Praise and chant it with the tongue. Of all places, the most sublime place, O Nanak, is that heart in which the Name of the Lord abides (Guru Granth Sahib Ji : 266).

Ultimate Questions

The Gurus did not believe in religion as such. They were seekers after truth and so the 'truths' they promote are to be realized through reflection and experience.

Sikhs regard life as full of choices. Sikhs say that people can either choose to focus on God and live with That in their lives or stumble on with a focus on the doubting self.

Sikhs see Haumai or 'Am I-ness?' as the fundamental problem. Doubt leads people to fear and from there to self-centredness. This is the key problem of a manmukh or self-centred person. However, for Sikhs, the real origin of the self is that it has been made by God and contains the Divine imprint or Shabad. This Shabad or Word is God and is the reason why God is with and in all people.

The Gurus taught the Unity of Being: '1-All-Creativity Is Reality'. The Gurus taught that separating matter and spirit or the phenomenal and noumenal worlds was the root of ignorance.

Sikhs consider that evil is caused by people and they will be punished for it. It is a result of free will which makes it possible for us to have the chance to enjoy a relationship with God. The Sikh response can be seen as part of a more general mystical theodicy where suffering can cause people to re-focus their lives and bring them closer to God.

The purpose of life is to become a "sachiara" – truthful, real, authentic – by breaking through the "dam of filth" and re-unite with God who dwells inside us as "fragrance in a flower", a "reflection in a mirror", "fire inside of wood". In re-connecting to the "breath of life" humans connect with God as "water flows into water".

The final destiny of all beings is to re-unite with God as "sparks from a fire". These images are not literal descriptions of the relationship between humans and God, however, since what language can tell us about can be defined as the world of phenomena. What lies beyond the reach of language is the Naam, the person of God, the Numinous who is known through personal experience through God's own power, God's grace.

God

It is impossible to describe God. As it says in the Guru Granth Sahib Ji:

If it is sayable, it is within the range of the word, If it is unsayable, it is outside the steady grasp of the mind, The real is where the sayable and the unsayable meet.

What the real truly is, is altogether beyond comprehension (GGS 340).

Although people can say something about their relationship with God there is a limit to what can be communicated through language. Kabir writes: "Inexpressible is the story of Love. It cannot be revealed by words, Like the dumb eating sweet-meat, Only smiles, the sweetness he cannot tell". The implication of this is that the maps of the different religions, including Sikhi, can be used or ignored; what is important is the personal experience of the actual territory of God. Guru Gobind Singh Ji writes: "I salute That which is beyond religion."

For Sikhs, the Guru Granth Sahib Ji is an answer to the question. “How can we be Real? How can we break the dam of waste blocking us from Reality?” (Guru Granth Sahib Ji: 1)

“1 God is Reality, Naam” (Guru Granth Sahib: 1). The numeral ‘1’ at the beginning of the Guru Granth Sahib emphasises that there should not be any confusion about the Oneness of God and the Unity in existence.

Religion and Science

The Gurus have no concept of ‘science’ as an independent area of enquiry. The aim of a Sikh life is to be a ‘sachiarā’ – truthful or real or authentic – in every area of life.

Sikhs consider that both science and religion are enterprises to do with seeking the truth. The word ‘Sikh’ is etymologically linked to with ‘seeker’ of truth.

Sikhs feel that religious experience cannot be explained as language cannot ‘capture’ God.

Sikhs consider that both science and religion are engaged in the same process, i.e. discovering the truth.

There are similarities in some fundamental Sikh beliefs, for instance, that all life has evolved from water. “O Nanak, this world is all water; everything came from water” (Guru Granth Sahib Ji: 1283).

One could argue that life derived from carbon found in rocks and/or exists deep inside rocks: “From rocks and stones He created living beings; He places their nourishment before them” (Guru Granth Sahib Ji: 10).

On the other hand, there are some ideas yet to be confirmed by science. There is a clear idea that there are limitless worlds and that God can be approached in many different ways. Therefore, there are saints of other worlds – in other worlds, intelligent and indeed religious life on other planets. Speaking of the Court of God, “The devotees of many worlds dwell there. They celebrate; their minds are imbued with the True Lord” (Guru Granth Sahib Ji : 8).

Values and Commitments

Understanding how moral values and a sense of obligation can come from beliefs and experience;

Evaluating their own and others’ values in order to make informed, rational and imaginative choices.

Rules and Ethical Guidelines

The core values of Sikhi come from God. God is Sach (true, real) and so the aim of life is being sachiarā (authentic, truthful, real). The godly show God’s qualities as a calf shows us something of the nature of a cow. The quality of loving kindness (meeta) is a fundamental one to describe social relations. The basic qualities humans need to serve God are fearlessness and truthfulness.

Sikhs consider that all people know what is true since God dwells within us as a reflection in a mirror and fragrance in a flower. God’s Hukam (Divine Will) is written in our very being.

Sikhs focus on God and being godly. A person who does this is called a gurmukh. The opposite is a manmukh (self-centred person). It is wrong to deny God and focus on our own doubts (haumai). By battling their own nature humans lose mastery of themselves and become a slave of five basic emotions – pride, anger, lust, greed and attachment.

Sikhs believe that a person should develop their relationship with God. This will reflect itself in godly conduct with other people. The community should work efficiently to expand God-fuelled loving kindness in social interactions rather than doubt-fuelled selfish acts.

Within the Sikh tradition, there are no 'rules' as such, but the *Rahit Maryada* (Code of Conduct) establishes a framework for spiritual practice which emphasizes moral acts as the basis, purpose and reflection of spiritual progress.

Ethical discussions are informed by reference to the teachings of the Guru Granth Sahib Ji. For example, regarding the organization of society, the Guru Granth Sahib Ji says:

"Henceforth: such is the Will of God: No one shall coerce another, no one shall exploit another. Everyone, each individual, has the inalienable birth-right to seek and pursue happiness and self-fulfilment. Love and persuasion is the only law of social coherence." (Guru Granth Sahib Ji: 74).

Sikhs have an active obligation to disobey any law that violates these principles, e.g. Guru Nanak Dev Ji breaking the ban on music in Baghdad, Guru Hargobind Ji commanding Sikhs to bear arms and ride horses in violation of Islamic law on *dhimmitude*.

Moral Exemplars

Sikhs use the Gurus and their contemporaries as their role models and as a reference point for action and for guidance on political, social and environmental issues.

Regarding the martyrdom of the Ninth Guru for leading a non-violent political campaign, Sikh scripture says that,

Tegh Bahadur broke the mortal vessel of his body by striking it at the head of the Emperor of Delhi and retreated to his 'Original Abode', the God. Truly incomparable is this great deed done to assert and protect three basic human rights: the first, to secure for everyone the liberty to worship; the second, to uphold the inviolable dignity of every person's private and personal point of contact with God and their right to observe dharma, what they conceive as basic principles of cosmic or individual existence, and the third to uphold every good person's imprescriptible right to pursue their own vision of happiness and self-fulfilment (Dasam Granth, 54).

The Gurus also promoted 'vechar' a sharing dialogue, rather than 'baad', debate. This is because what is being shared is the product of personal experience rather than an intellectual exercise where people are trying to apply language to that which is beyond language.

Individual and Social Responsibility

A Sikh should be focused on God at all times and places. How Sikhs find God will depend, in part, on how they approach God. The Gurus themselves enjoy a pantheistic vision in which they find God within themselves and all things. "One Light fills all creation. That Light is You" (Guru Granth Sahib Ji: 13). The implication of this is an attitude of mystic revolution, seeking God within yourself and serving God in others. This ideology is formalized in the saint-soldier ideal of the Khalsa, Guru and disciple in one time.

For Sikhs, with regard to health, the body is the temple of God so it should not be abused. Thus anything that harms the body should be avoided. Since the body has been designed by God there is no need to try to improve it, by for instance, cutting the hair. Four hymns state that the female period is natural and not the result or cause of any pollution or hurt or wound.

With wealth, the Sikh ideal is 'outwardly rich, inwardly a fakir'. A Sikh believes that a person should work hard to earn a living and not depend on begging, directly or indirectly through a system of benefits. At the same time people should share their money to earn good karma. Two stories from Guru Nanak Dev Ji's life illustrate this. The first called the 'true deal' involved him in choosing to spend money feeding the hungry, rather than investing it in business. The second involves him in challenging a millionaire to return a needle to him in the next world. The confused man asks how this could be possible and then understands that you cannot take the money with you.

Euthanasia and Abortion

Sikhs should always strive for life though often this commitment can lead to difficult choices.

For Sikhs, voluntary euthanasia would be wrong as life belongs to God. However, non-voluntary euthanasia might be acceptable since the person could not survive without constant medical intervention. Abortion should not take place unless it is beneficial for the mother, for instance, her life is in danger.

Sex

For Sikhs, only sex in marriage is acceptable since marriage is a reflection of commitment that two people feel for one another and sex is an expression of that commitment.

Crime and Punishment

Sikhs say that a primary purpose of punishment is reparation. For example, Sikhs who breach the Sikh Rahit Maryada (Code of Conduct) should confess their shortcomings and be awarded community service.

War

As for war, several of the Gurus took part in wars. The basic principle is that armed conflict is only acceptable when all peaceful methods have failed. There is no enemy in the combat – what is being opposed is the oppression being resisted. Therefore, when any person is wounded they should be helped. Bhai Kannayya performed this noble service during the wars of the Tenth Guru, Guru Gobind Singh Ji. Moreover, no one should be attacked once they have surrendered. It would make use of indiscriminate weapons, such as weapons of mass destruction, wrong.

The Environment

For Sikhs, the environment and the forces of nature are regarded as sentient. This means that the wind, water, fire, planets, galaxies, solar systems all praise God (Guru Granth Sahib Ji: 6).

Animals are regarded as sentient and as worshipping God. While many Sikhs are vegetarian for this reason, the official view is that it is acceptable to eat meat so long as it does not damage your health and it is not killed in a sacrificial way, e.g. halal meat. The reason is that vegetables are also regarded as living things, so why is the discrimination being made? (Guru Granth Sahib Ji: 1189).

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