

Sikhism

Introduction	2
Matters of Central Importance	3
Basic Beliefs	3
The Scriptures and Authority	4
Founders of Faith	5
An Exemplar of Faith	5
Structures of Belief/Faith	6
Guidance for Life	6
Religious Practice	7
Reading and Interpreting the Scriptures	7
The Journey of Life	7
Commemorations and Celebrations	8
Expression of Belief/Faith	9
Stories of Faith	9
Symbols of Faith	9
Creative Expression	10
Architecture	10
Expressing Faith through Worship	11
Pilgrimage	11
Diversity and Interaction	11
Foundations of Identity and Belonging	11
Religious / Spiritual Identity	12
Family and Community	12
Sikh Diversity	12
Other Religions & Beliefs	13
Making Meaning	13
Religious Experience	13
Ultimate Questions	14
The One	14
Religion and Science	14
Influence on Morality and Society	15
Rules and Ethical Guidelines	15
Moral Exemplars	15
Individual and Social Responsibility	15
Euthanasia and Abortion	16
Sex	16
Crime and Punishment	16
War	16
The Environment	16
Websites	17
Bibliography	17

Introduction

Note on terminology

The overall title of this essay is 'Sikhism' as the most widely recognised term. It is used by the exam boards 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 just an 'ism' or worldview, it is also the way of life of a people.

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

Our series of subject knowledge essays are written for the teacher to expand and deepen understanding of religion and worldviews. You might like to share extracts with students but these are aimed at teachers and other professionals.

Each essay is authored by an expert in the field. They might take a particular position or stance with regards to the worldview in question. You can find out about each author in the biographies given at the start of the essay.

We hope you find these essays helpful as you learn more about this fascinating subject.

About the Author

Dr Ranvir Singh is Head of RE at The Heathland School. He has been involved with 'interfaith' issues for many years having given talks at 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 was a board member of the Religious Education Council of England and Wales and introduced the idea of worldviews into discussions about the Non-Statutory Framework for RE.

Matters of Central Importance

Basic Beliefs

Sikhs believe that there is One at the heart of the universe, a unity of Being. Oneness is so central that the Sikh scriptures use the number 1, rather than the word. To fulfil our lives and properly flourish we need to connect to that heart. The One loves humans and reaches out to all humans through Grace – gurprasad or the True Guru. To restore that flow we need to remove the blockage of haumai – literally, 'me-ness'. Once removed we turn from being a manmukh - self-facing, to a gurmukh – Grace-facing. Connected with the flow of that current the gurmukh is a lamp that shows the Presence of divine qualities, called Naam, literally, name.

Since the One reaches out to all humans, everyone is equal and religious identity is meaningless. Sikhi is about living in the right way, orthopraxy, not having the right belief, orthodoxy. One of the morning prayers includes the affirmation, "I salute the One beyond religions" (Jaap Sahib). Religions at best can point the way to the One but from the Sikh perspective cannot be confused with the One. Rather, all the answers we seek are written into our very being by the One Being. We are persons because the Universe has a personality. From the Sikh perspective we are not just biological, chemical organisms because the universe is not dead. Its life or mind is what Sikhs think of as the One. Scripture says that the One is within us as "fire inside wood, a reflection in a mirror, fragrance within a flower" (Guru Granth Sahib: 606, 684). The True Guru is our Inner Tutor, our intuition, our common sense. This is the hukam or will of the universe that we must, naturally, spontaneously give expression for, rather than opposing. Naam japna or mindfulness of the Presence is opening oneself to the energies or way of the One.

In the Sikh worldview what counts is how people live, not what they believe. If they choose the One, they will connect with Life here and in the afterlife. If humans have centred their energies on something else, Sikhs believe they will miss the path. They will suffer in heavens and hells as their actions deserve. However, this judgement is not final. The love of the One means that there is another chance through the cycle of rebirth. People may roam through species till they again receive the opportunity of human life.

Distinctive features of Sikhi include the equality of women and men, rejection of priesthood, the 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). As the One lives in the world Sikhs believe in 'chardi kala' or rising energy in the world. The world should be continually improved and so the Sikh ideal is a saint-soldier, a saint allowing the Light to shine through them and a soldier connecting with others to reduce darkness in the world.

The sacred text is the Guru Granth Sahib. 'Sahib' is a title of honour, 'Granth' means folio or book. Therefore, the Guru Granth Sahib is the Respected Guru-Book of Enlightenment. It is a mirror reflecting the True Guru who is Life and the Voice of Love within us. It 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 and none. For Sikhs, the Guru Granth Sahib is an answer to the question. "How can we be real? How can we break the dam of waste blocking us from the 1Reality?" (Guru Granth Sahib Ji: 1). The self is what separates us from unity of being.

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. The Khalsa is a religious order of people who have pledged themselves to active discipleship of the Guru. This fellowship of saint-soldiers has a rule, which is the Rahit Maryada or code of conduct.

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

1. The Guru Granth Sahib Ji can be translated as the 'Respected Guru-Book of Enlightenment'. 'Sahib' means 'respected' and a 'folio' is simply a large bound book. It is a chorus of praise for the One. This is because it is composed of nearly 6000 hymns. Moreover, it is organised musically into 31 ragas or styles of South Asian music. There are 36 mystic poets from different faith traditions and none in addition to six Gurus. There are writings from the twelfth to the seventeenth century.

The Guru Granth Sahib Ji does not contain stories but covers both religious and social subjects, such as devotion to the One, the unity of Being, oneness of humanity, the importance of the Guru, aligning ourselves with the universe, breaking down divisions such as the caste system, the importance of service to others and family life. The first nine words of the Guru Granth Sahib is called the Mool Mantar. This formula occurs hundreds of times within the Guru Granth Sahib, either in full or in an abbreviated form with five words. The full form may be translated as:

1Being Energising Reality. Name. Creator. Without fear. Without hate. Form of Infinity. Beyond birth and death. Self-existent. Grace.

The short form may be translated as: 1Being Energising Reality. Grace.

The most significant secondary texts are the writings of Bhai Gurdas which are regarded as a basic summary of the main themes of the Guru Granth Sahib Ji and texts written by Bhai Nand Lal. His Diwan-i-Goya clarifies the relationship between Sikhi and Sufism (Islamic mysticism). There were also texts written around the court of Guru Gobind Singh. These are compiled into a document called the Dasam Granth.

2. Life stories of the Gurus.

The lives of the Gurus are not contained in a systematic way in the Sikh scriptures. However, these traditional accounts can be confirmed by episodes in the Guru Granth Sahib. An example would be the Siddha Gosht or debate between Guru Nanak and the Siddhas. The Siddhas may be regarded as the remnant of Buddhism in India or as Buddhist-Hindu Tantrics. This debate is found in pages 938-946 of the Guru Granth Sahib and is a unique example of interfaith dialogue being contained in a scripture. They can also be confirmed by academic historical methods. This is because the Gurus lived between 1469 and 1708. This period corresponds to Tudor and Stuart rule in England.

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 the One, at one with the Divine Light, forms of the Formless, visualisations of the One in the same way as one can see "a cow in a calf" according to scripture.

The founder of the religion and the first Guru was Guru Nanak (1469-1539 CE). He 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 by Guru Arjan Dev in 1604.

The final human Guru was Guru Gobind Singh (1666-1708 CE). He had the title of Guru Gobind Rai till the Vaisakhi of 1699. On that day the Khalsa was revealed. People would join the Khalsa and be knighted, given the surnames 'Singh' for men and 'Kaur' for women. Singh or lion heart was a title given to the high class aristocratic class; princess was also reserved for that class. The Khalsa therefore represents a social revolution as ordinary people enjoyed a change of status as well as the obligation to carry swords. Swords had previously been reserved for men, and then only for men or the aristocratic class. Ordinary peasants fought with farm tools. When he joined the Khalsa Guru Gobind Rai became called Guru Gobind Singh. In Sikh terms he became 'Guru and disciple in one', at once role model and ordinary Sikh. Just like any other saint-soldier of the Khalsa he was under the rule they had pledged to follow, the Rahit Maryada or code of conduct. Moreover, he was under their authority and, for example, he was ordered by them to leave the field at the Battle of Chamkaur.

3. The 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 knights of the Khalsa 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.

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 (1469-1539), who came from Talwandi, near Lahore (now Pakistan). Guru Nanak's teachings were composed in the context of, but distinguished from, the Hinduism and Islam of his day. An example is that he names Azrael as the angel of death. This is a name found in the Book of Tobit for a personality important both in the Old Testament and the Qur'an. At the same time, he talks about Yama, a god of death mentioned in Hindu and Buddhist scriptures.

Guru Nanak emphasised meditation on the One (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 for free without any distinction.

He was followed by nine further Gurus:

- 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 Harkrishan (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 in terms of teaching is the holy text of the Guru Granth Sahib itself. The Khalsa also has the status of Guru as it implements the teachings into ever-changing contexts. This status was designed and demonstrated by Guru Gobind Singh.

An Exemplar of Faith

Although the Ten Gurus are regarded by Sikhs as the template for all things spiritual, some Sikhs act as role models to others in specific ways. The Rahit Maryada or code of conduct states that Sikhs are encouraged to work together in order to effect the maximum social benefit through least effort and to meet together to inspire each other. An example of someone who follows this guidance would be Ravinder Singh of Khalsa Aid. He set the UK based organisation up in 1999 to offer help in emergency relief in the Balkans. Since then the group has provided support around the world. More details can be found at khalsaaid.org.

Structures of Belief/Faith

Guidance for Life

Sikhs consider that beliefs must translate into action as matter must be energized, maya (the physical world) must be charged with the Name (Being). The phenomenal world should be transformed by the numinous so that through spiritual experience we may enjoy a fully, naturally human life.

Sikhs feel that it is essential to dissuade people from rituals based on the idea that the One is mean, and encourage people to experiment with the graceful, generous Reality. Therefore, Sikhi does not believe in animal sacrifice, fasting or any form of physical or mental deprivation. The only thing that we can offer the One is our self, a space for Being to live with us.

In terms of society Sikhs are taught that, "No one is my enemy, and no one is a stranger. I am friendly towards everyone" (Guru Granth Sahib: 1299). Sikhs believe that the One 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. This is visible in the langar or free kitchen. Anyone, belonging to any religion, ethnic background, social class or gender, is welcome to eat the same food as everyone else, for free.

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 One. 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 The One 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).

It is, therefore, fair to say that Sikhs believe in individual human rights: freedom of worship, freedom of conscience and the right to pursue happiness. Sikhs believe that progress in the world will be based on the spiritual sovereignty of the individual.

Regarding the organization of society: "Henceforth: such is the Will of The One: 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: 74).

In terms of politics there is an emphasis on persuasion and consent. Sikhs reject coercion or force as a method of government. They, therefore, reject the justification of coercion. In 1606 Guru Arjun became the first Sikh martyr and was executed by the Mughal Emperor Jehangir. This followed the Guru's refusal to pay taxes in support of ordinary people who could not afford to pay taxes due to a poor harvest. The Emperor felt he had the divine authority of a ruler; the Guru would not accept this point.

Sikhs have an active obligation to disobey any law that violates these principles. For example, Guru Nanak Dev broke a ban on music in Baghdad and Guru Hargobind Ji commanded Sikhs to bear arms and ride horses in violation of Islamic law on dhimmitude, which reserved these activities for Muslims. He was imprisoned but later released on the Diwali of 1619 from Gwalior Fort. When he was offered a pardon he refused unless 52 princes were also released. The Emperor conceded that he could free whoever held onto his cloak, thereby coming under his protection. The Guru had 52 tassels added to his cloak and holding onto a tassel each they were all freed. Sikhs, therefore, celebrate on the same day as Diwali but call the event Bandi Chor Diwas or prisoner release day.

In terms of economics the idea that people have the right to pursue happiness and self-fulfilment is connected to the idea that "no one shall exploit another." A Being of grace has created a bountiful world. However, greed has distorted the world. "The bounty of nature is there to be used. There is enough for all but in this world it is not shared justly" (Guru Granth Sahib: 1171). Until a one humanity perspective is taken, economic injustice will continue.

Religious Practice

The status of the Guru Granth Sahib 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.

During 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 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 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 Guru Granth Sahib is written in the Gurmukhi script. However, there are words from many languages including Persian 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 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 Kartarpur, in the Punjab in Northern India. Later, the writings of the Ninth Guru were added and the text known as the Guru Granth Sahib 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 the One, the mystics among themselves and between the soul of the reader or commentator and the One.

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 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 the One. The Gurus use names and ideas common to different traditions, e.g. Azrael for the angel of death and the bridge over hell (Islam) as well as nirvana (Buddhism) to describe unity of being.

Each ceremony combines the mysteries and impulses of death and sex. The naming of the new-born infant by the Guru Granth Sahib 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 the One is not from A to B. For The One is not apart from us; we have to turn ourselves around to face the Being who was always with 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" (Guru Granth Sahib: 205). 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 the One is not here, but is there. Rather, the One is everywhere. The two humans re-enact a play of this spiritual journey. The Groom leads for the Gurbani usually signifies the One 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" (Guru Granth Sahib: 788). Without making this journey to the One the centre of their life path together (just as Guru Granth Sahib 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 the Sikh 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 - the day of death and marriage - come?

Commemorations and Celebrations

Since 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, the first Guru.
- 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, 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 (his own and those of Bhai Gurdas) and Guru Gobind Singh (those of Bhai Nand Lal) and the martyrdom of Guru Tegh Bahadur (his own).

Melas:

– Vaisakhi – 14 April – birth of the Khalsa, which is the Sikh community but also the living Guru, the Guru Khalsa Panth.

Vaisakhi 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 and other competitions.

– Diwali – October/November – release of Guru Hargobind in 1619 as a prisoner of conscience – celebrated with fireworks.

Expression of Belief/Faith

Stories of Faith

The stories of significance for Sikh faith are contained within the Guru Granth Sahib and the Janam Sakhis or 'life stories' of the Gurus. Without these texts there would be no record of what the Gurus had said or done. However, the Janam Sakhis are not scriptural. They are, therefore, interpreted within the framework of the Guru Granth Sahib.

At one level the Guru Granth Sahib contain the teachings of the One (revelation); at another it contains commentaries of the writings of other Gurus and mystics (spiritual 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. It is the True Guru:

Among all is the Light – You are that Light. By this realisation, that Light is seen 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 the One and/or as a series of spiritual commentaries on religious experience and/or as a Living Embodiment of the Shabad written into the universe and each soul.

Symbols of Faith

Sikh symbols are seen as gateways that point to Reality.

An 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 the One's Infinity, without beginning and without end); a Khanda (double-edged sword – which stands for the One's power of justice and mercy, or creation and destruction, the double edge of the One'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 ideal person is 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 and Hindu rishis among them.
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 the One.
3. Kara means 'bangle' and reflects the infinity of the One – 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 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 sung to music.

Many people interpret the language of the Guru Granth Sahib 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 god of death and his minions which is found in Hinduism and Buddhism, but the name Azrael has also been used, who is the angel of death in Islam and is also 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. One painting of Guru Tegh Bahadur can be dated to 1668 when he was painted at the court of Shaista Khan, governor of Bengal. The Guru was there on a peace-making mission between descendants of the princes who had been freed by Guru Hargobind from Gwalior Fort in 1619. However, no religious importance has ever been attached to this painting. Its importance lies in historical record rather than religion.

Other paintings of the Gurus are considered to be for educational or inspirational purposes only and are not regarded as objects of worship themselves.

Architecture

The Harmandir 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 (Guru Granth Sahib: 606). 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: 7-8). Therefore, there are many worlds where sentient life is able to align with the One. The purpose of the world is to create a space where the One can expand its love beyond itself and we can be trained in love. The material worlds are spaces where the Spirit is potentially allowed to shine through the veil of shame and filth that is the ego.

One verse occurs three times in the Guru Granth Sahib Ji – in the morning and evening prayers and in the main text also. The Sodra verse discusses planets, fire, water, Buddhas, angels, the gods and goddesses and saints praising the One in its court. Sodra means 'the gate', in this case, the door to the divine kingdom.

Gurdwara literally means 'door to the Guru'. The Guru in the form of the Guru Granth Sahib holds court in the gurdwara. 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.

Worshippers always take off their shoes when entering a Gurdwara. They also bow or prostrate themselves before the Guru Granth Sahib. 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 provide food and sustenance. 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. The Guru Granth Sahib describes itself on p.1429 as a platter serving spiritual nourishment of three kinds – reality, contentment and food for thought and discussion.

A Gurdwara is not only a place of worship, it is also a centre for the community. Therefore, there are often medical dispensaries or educational facilities associated with it. Classes are run for Panjabi and music so that the younger generation may develop their ability to take part in Sikh life. There are often classes for English and citizenship for the older generation so they can play a fuller role in British society.

Pilgrimage

Pilgrimage is condemned by the Gurus; the real pilgrimage is to The One 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 The One 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 The One he asked them to point his feet to where The One did not live. All time is holy since the One has been "true from the beginning, is true now, and will always be true" (GGS: 1).

Diversity and Interaction

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 as initiation into the Khalsa is a spiritual rebirth in the House of the Guru.

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 three practices – acknowledging and remembering the One at all times and places, earning an honest living and sharing. These practices will help Sikhs grow morally. Morally, a Sikh is expected to develop control over five emotions which are 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 the One and are a gift from the One.

Since, for Sikhs, the goal is to develop a relationship with the One, 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 the One 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 the One and contains the Divine imprint or Shabad. This Shabad or Word is the One and is the reason why the One 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 the One 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 the One is the basis of the Sikh's Grace-filled and loving relationship. This means that among Sikhs there is a sense of optimism in Divine support for the future.

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 'The Journey of life' p7). They will also perform some or all of 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 and the Guru Khalsa Panth (Khalsa). Variant groups that exist are the Namdharis and the Nirankaris who believe in a living human Guru. These groups number around ten thousand out of a global population between 25 and 30 million.

Within the community there are different attitudes towards the Khalsa. Some Sikhs regard it as the ideal as it involves following in the footsteps of Guru Gobind Singh. Others regard the Khalsa as an ideal but decide that the commitment is too great.

Within the Khalsa itself there are those, belonging to the Tat Khalsa, who take seriously the responsibility of the Khalsa to update the Rahit Maryada (code of conduct) so that it is relevant to changing circumstances. This was last completed in 1945. However, others differ and follow what they regard as a more traditional line (for example, the Akhand Keertanee Jatha and Damdami Taksal). It is important to note that while they might regard the Tat Khalsa as overly lax, from the Tat Khalsa perspective there is nothing wrong in following a more traditional approach. Their argument is that the stricter or more particular approach cannot be applied to people who do not agree with it.

Another difference is between the Khalsa who follow the code of conduct agreed in 1945 or particular practices followed before then and those who follow Sants, living saints. The followers of a Sant may argue that the particular religious experience of a holy man is better able to guide their practice than historical or consensual codes.

Other Religions & Beliefs

Sikhs welcome inter-faith dialogue as it can be argued that Guru Nanak Dev was engaged in it hundreds of years ago. The Guru Granth Sahib contains the record of his debate with the Siddhas (a group of Buddhists or Buddhist-Hindu Tantrics) and the accounts of his life (Janam 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, provision of free vegetarian food to all (langar), and insistence that people of any faith could know the One meant that inter-faith worship has always been a part of Sikh worship. This is symbolized by the widely held belief that 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 the One) 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 the One. Of all speeches, the ambrosial speech (Amritbani) is to hear the One’s praise and to repeat it with the tongue. Of all places, that heart (soul) is the best place wherein dwell the Name of the One, O Nanak (Guru Granth Sahib: 266).

Making Meaning

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 the One Himself. For Sikhs, the One 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 the One 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. Our undeniable akl (common sense) is the basis of the religion. Doubting whether the world is real, or we are real or other people are real is over-clever. It is unsustainable over time. Therefore, it is part of our common sense that they are real. It is quite irrelevant that this is

not a proof. The same applies to religious experience. Our undeniable and often life changing experience of divine energy and personality is the evidence for the One. That so many people from so many faith traditions and none over a period of centuries have the experiences collected in the Guru Granth Sahib suggests that this is credible testimony.

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 the One 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.

Ultimate Questions

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 the One. 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 the One.

The purpose of life is to become a "sachiara" – truthful, real, authentic – by breaking through the "dam of filth" (Guru Granth Sahib: 1) and re-unite with the One 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 The One as "water flows into water".

The final destiny of all beings is to re-unite with the One as "sparks from a fire". These images are not literal descriptions of the relationship between humans and the One, however, since what language can tell us is limited. Language cannot capture the full sense of any experience or relationship.

The One

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

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 (Guru Granth Sahib: 340).

Although people can say something about their relationship with the One there is a limit to what can be communicated through language. 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 the One. Guru Gobind Singh writes in a morning prayer: "I salute That which is beyond religion."

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 'sachiara' – 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' The One.

Sikhs consider that both science and religion are engaged in the same process; that is, 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: 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: 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 the One 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 the One, “The devotees of many worlds dwell there. They celebrate; their minds are imbued with the True Lord” (Guru Granth Sahib: 8).

Influence on Morality and Society

Rules and Ethical Guidelines

The core values of Sikhi come from the One. The One is Sach (true, real) and so the aim of life is being sachara (authentic, truthful, real). The godly, whatever their religious allegiance or lack thereof, show the One'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 the One are humility so that we are open to the One and lovingkindness in our relationships with others. Sikhs consider that all people know what is true since the One dwells within us as a reflection in a mirror and fragrance in a flower. The One's Hukam (Divine Will) is written in our very being and is the basis of our common sense.

Sikhs focus on The One 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 The One 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.

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. Sikhi is about becoming a virtuous person. This is someone who lives in a godly way.

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 One. 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 The One 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 the One at all times and places. How Sikhs find the One will depend, in part, on how they approach the One. The Gurus themselves enjoy a panentheistic vision in which they find the One within themselves and all things. “One Light fills all creation. That Light is You” (Guru Granth Sahib: 13). The implication of this is an attitude of mystic

revolution, seeking The One within yourself and serving the One 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 the One so it should not be abused. Thus anything that harms the body should be avoided. Since the body has been designed by the One there is no need to try to improve it, by for instance, cutting 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 as an expression of lovingkindness towards others and to earn good karma. Three 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. The third involves him refusing to break bread with a wealthy man. His argument is that his bread is filled with the blood he has squeezed from those who work for him. The person he would prefer to eat with is poor but honest and hardworking. His bread is filled with the milk of lovingkindness.

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 the One. However, non-voluntary euthanasia might be acceptable if 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 believe 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 by the congregation.

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. Moreover, no one should be attacked once they have surrendered. Sikh teachings suggest that use of indiscriminate weapons, such as weapons of mass destruction, is 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 the One (Guru Granth Sahib Ji: 6).

Animals are regarded as sentient and as worshipping the One. 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 as a sacrifice or 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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