

Voices from Sikhi. Worldview Traditions

Over the last few years we have collated responses to questions about religion and worldviews from different perspectives. This resource provides personal answers to questions from lived experience and were written directly by believers.

1. How do you believe the world was created?.....	1
2. What will happen when I die?	2
3. What would you say is the importance of community in Sikhism? How does the gurdwara and langar contribute to this?	2
4. What are the main misconceptions in Sikhism as a religion?	3
5. What is it like being a Sikh in the UK?	3
6. What kinds of festivals and celebrations do you have? What happens in some of the Sikh festivals?	3
7. What is your view as a Sikh about animal rights? And how does this affect your view on the world?	4
8. In your opinion, what is the most important thing about being a Sikh? What does being Sikh mean to you?	4
9. What made you choose to become a member of the Khalsa? Did you feel different after being initiated into the Khalsa?.....	4
10. Why do Sikhs go to a place of worship? What are the important rooms and features in a gurdwara?.....	5

1. How do you believe the world was created?

All Sikhs would agree that Sikhism is a modern religion. This is because the Sikh Gurus not only rejected the Hindu and Muslim ideas of their time, but also seemed to reject that such knowledge was possible at all. This opens up a space for human research rather than religious dogma. "What was that time, and what was that moment? What was that day, and what was that date? What was that season, and what was that month, when the Universe was created? The Pandits, the religious scholars, cannot find that time, even if it is written in the Puraanas. That time is not known to the Qazis, who study the Koran. The day and the date are not known to the Yogis, nor is the month or the season. The Creator who created this creation only It Itself knows" (Guru Granth Sahib: 4). This quote is also in line with the idea that absolute and real truth claims are for God only; humans can only aim for pragmatic knowledge and decisions about how to live a good life.

Other Sikhs might reject this pragmatic interpretation and try to blend the Sikh and scientific accounts. One might interpret the following verse to suggest a Big Bang: "You created the vast expanse of the Universe with One Word! Hundreds of thousands of rivers began to flow. How can Your Creative Potency be described?" (Guru Granth Sahib:3).

Other examples can also be found. For instance, there is the argument that all life has evolved from water. "O Nanak, this world is all water; everything came from water" (Guru Granth Sahib: 1283). If one wishes to argue that life derived from carbon found in rocks and/or exists deep inside rocks one could look at, "From rocks and stones He created living beings; He places their nourishment before them" (Guru Granth Sahib: 10).

If one wished to speculate on future scientific discoveries, one could look to superstring theory: "The world is strung upon Your Thread" (Guru Granth Sahib:1386) and also "he has strung the three worlds (heavens, earths and hells) upon His Thread" (Guru Granth Sahib: 92). 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: 8).

Sikh thought combines the idea of Nothing or Sunya (the Void) with monotheism (the One God) and panentheism (the Oneness of Creator and creation), a God present in, yet separate from, the created universe.

"For millions upon millions, countless years was spread darkness,
When existed neither earth nor heaven, but only the limitless Divine Ordinance.
Then existed neither day or night, nor sun or moon;
As the Creator was absorbed in an unbroken trance.
Existed then neither forms of creation, nor of speech; neither wind nor water.
Neither was creation or disappearance or transmigration.
Then were not continents, neither regions, the seven seas, nor rivers with water flowing.
Existed then neither heaven or the mortal world or the nether world;
Neither hell or heaven or time that destroys.
Hell and heaven, birth and death were then not--none arrived or departed.

Then were not Brahma, Vishnu or Shiva:
None other than the Sole Lord was visible.
Neither existed then female or male, or caste and birth--
None suffering and joy received.
Unknowable Himself, was He the source of all utterance; Himself the unknowable unmanifested.
As it pleased Him, the world He created;
Without a supporting power the expanse He sustained.

Brahma, Vishnu, and Shiva He created and to maya-attachment gave increase.
(To a rare one was the Master's Word imparted.)
Himself He made His Ordinance operative and watched over it:
Creating continents, spheres and nether worlds, the hidden He made manifest.
Creating the universe Himself, He has remained unattached.
The compassionate Lord too has made the holy centre [the human being].
Combining air, water, and fire, He created the citadel of the body.

The Creator fashioned the Nine Abodes [of sensation];
In the Tenth [the superconscious mind] is lodged the Lord, unknowable, limitless.
The illimitable Lord in His unattributed state of void assumed might;
He, the infinite One, remaining detached:
Displaying his power, He himself from the void created inanimate things.
From the unattributed void were created air and water.
Raising creation, He dwells as monarch in the citadel of the body.
Lord! In the fire and water [of the body] exists Thy light;
In Thy [original] state of void was lodged [unmanifest] the power of creation."

2. What will happen when I die?

A person is taken away by angels to answer for their actions. They get punished in hells and / or rewarded in heavens and then sent back to Earth to continue their spiritual development. However, if they are developed then they stay with God. Developed means that they put God at the centre of their lives. This is like a young mother who is able to do loads of things but still keep her mind on her baby, or a young boy flying a kite who chats and walks but does not let the kite fall down. In the same way we can live in the world and remember God all the time.

3. What would you say is the importance of community in Sikhism? How does the gurdwara and langar contribute to this?

Sangat or fellowship is crucial as we often do what others around us are. "It is difficult to pick up a piece of coal without getting your hands dusty" suggests that we should avoid the company of people who are self-

centred and spend time with people who are God-centred/Life-centred, whether Sikh or not. The gurdwara provides a framework for this as langar is food that can be eaten by anyone, vegetarian and even Jain (no garlic) and the Guru Granth Sahib is a hymn book containing the writings of six Sikh Gurus and thirty-six others, including Hindus, Muslims and those of no fixed religion. Spiritual seekers of all traditions and none are welcome to gather to join in praise of the 1 and share their experience, thoughts and feelings about the spiritual life.

4. What are the main misconceptions in Sikhism as a religion?

I think it is the idea that Sikhs believe in the five Ks.

People think this because it is a visible marker and is the main reason Sikhs may be in the news - cases involving the kara, kirpan or kesh.

The way forward is to focus on what Sikhs actually believe –

- A panentheistic divinity (a God of universal grace living in all people and things) leading to radical ideology of inclusion, equality and democracy between women and men, different social classes (castes) and different religions, manifested in the langar,

- Scripture (Guru Granth Sahib) that is also an interfaith prayer book (containing the writing of people of diverse faiths and none)

- And lives of the Gurus, e.g.

Guru Amar Das taking action to enforce equality for women,

Guru Arjun martyred in 1606 for writing that people should only follow laws they consent to, and encouraging people not to pay taxes,

Guru Tegh Bahadur martyred in 1675 for protecting the right of Hindus to follow religious practices he disagreed with and

Guru Gobind Singh and the formation of the Khalsa in 1699 - a fully armed people's republic without priesthood and with no one higher or lower, so the Guru also became a member and followed the rulings of the people's representatives.

5. What is it like being a Sikh in the UK?

It is nice being a Sikh in the UK as people in the UK enjoy freedom of religion. This means that they can practise whichever religion they want. Also, Sikhs are allowed to wear religious items such as their turbans on motorbikes. This is because there is a long relationship between Sikhs and the British Army. Ten of thousands of Sikhs died in both World Wars.

6. What kinds of festivals and celebrations do you have? What happens in some of the Sikh festivals?

There are two types of celebrations, melas and gurburbs.

Melas are traditional holidays, such as Vaisakhi, Diwali and Holi. Sikhs celebrate Vaisakhi as the birth of the Amrit ceremony and the Khalsa, Diwali as Bandi Chor Diwas, the day of prisoner release, and Holi as Hola Mohalla, where they compete in games of poetry and martial arts.

The most important mela is Vaisakhi, which is the spring harvest festival. It is celebrated with singing and dancing (bhangra), although people will also host Sikh martial arts competitions (gatka), street processions (nagar kirtan), changing of the flag (nishan sahib) to mark the Sikh new year, and reminders to the congregation (sangat) to receive amrit (Sikh initiation) to join the Khalsa since the Khalsa was revealed on Vaisakhi 1699.

Gurburbs are either related to the birth and death of the Gurus. The birth of the first Guru, Guru Nanak and the last Guru, Guru Gobind Singh are important as are the martyrdom of Guru Arjun, the fifth Guru and martyrdom of the ninth Guru, Guru Tegh Bahadur.

7. What is your view as a Sikh about animal rights? And how does this affect your view on the world?

We believe that the Earth is our mother, so some Sikh thinkers refer to it as a gyn-ecology (Nikky Guninder Kaur Singh).

As many Sikhs believe in rebirth, they regard animal life as sentient. The Sikhs who reject belief in rebirth will interpret those verses as metaphors for the twisting and turning and going in circles of the mind.

Many Sikhs believe that Sikhs ought to be vegetarian although this is not the official position of the Rahit Maryada or code of conduct.

Sikhs can eat meat of all sorts except that killed to make it halal. Some say this is a boundary marker set during a period when Muslims were turning to Sikh beliefs, others that it is due to the cruelty to animals involved. However, the debate is intense with many of those who are vegetarian believing that this is the correct practise.

8. In your opinion, what is the most important thing about being a Sikh? What does being Sikh mean to you?

The most important thing about being a Sikh is being a good person which means someone who worships the divine 1, earns money through honest work and shares - sometimes these three principles are called the threefold golden path. Sikhs believe that Life lives in people and the world; therefore, all of creation is connected and is all valuable.

For me being Sikh means living authentically (sachiara) in the Presence (Nam) of Being (Sat), which means that the 1 is connected to all. This abundant love means that we should share the universe's abundant love (grace) and wealth, it means that struggling for social justice is a form of worship as the divine in every heart means that serving people (sewa) is a way of serving the 1. This leads to the biggest charms for me which are:

- Interfaith highway, connecting different traditions. The reverence for Guru Nanak in Islam, Hinduism and Buddhism is unique and fascinating.
- The dating of the Gurus in the early modern period makes comparisons with Deists such as Voltaire, Rousseau, Locke and Tom Paine as well as pantheists like Spinoza interesting.
- Freedom from gods and kings – the myths and symbols which we use to make sense of our lives, promoted by religious priests in service to existing social and political orders based on a mean exclusivist God and a world of created scarcity to control rather than liberate people.

9. What made you choose to become a member of the Khalsa? Did you feel different after being initiated into the Khalsa?

I felt that I needed a new start in life. I needed a new beginning for myself and one which reflected my hopes to be the best I could - the most enlightened part of me.

Khalsa can be taken to mean 'the pure' or 'land belonging directly to the ruler'. In the first sense it means being a pure hearted or good person. In the second sense it means that there is no priest or religion in between you and your Creator.

I did feel differently after the rebirth of the Khalsa initiation ceremony. I felt that I had joined a new family with Guru Gobind Singh as my father and his four sons as my brothers. I felt very much part of this family and would not want to embarrass them. At the initiation the seeker passes

from one life, symbolically offering themselves as a sacrifice and is reborn as a new person, with a new name (Singh or Kaur), new body (the five Ks as augmented to you, "ang sang", part of you), new place of birth (Kesgarh - the fort of Uncut Hair/Nature), new citizenship (resident of Anandpur (the city of happiness) and new family (the Khalsa). Drinking from the same bowl is a part of that - we are 1.

10. Why do Sikhs go to a place of worship? What are the important rooms and features in a gurdwara?

Sikhs go to a place of worship to listen to the Guru Granth Sahib, meet other Sikhs and find out what is going on. This is because the gurdwara is a community centre as well as a place of worship. There are talks about health, trips for elderly people, fund raising for local charities and sports clubs.

The rooms link to the activities in the Gurdwara. So, the first would be a flagpole outside the Gurdwara where the Nishan Sahib, the Sikh flag is. Coming into the Gurdwara there is an area for shoes since Sikhs do not wear shoes inside the Gurdwara as they may sit on the floor. There may be washbasins close by so they can wash their hands before eating. Then there is the Langar hall where the Langar is served. This is free vegetarian food that anyone can come to eat. There will be a kitchen close to this where the langar is prepared. In a hall called the Diwan the main worship takes place. People sing and listen to hymns from the Guru Granth Sahib, the Sikh scripture. Sometimes there is a small room next to this where the Guru Granth Sahib is kept at night.

You should include a room called Classroom where there may be lessons in how to play the instruments used in worship and also teach people to read the language the Guru Granth Sahib is in. People can also learn English and take Citizenship lessons there. There will also be a Library where there are books on Sikhism. There will be a room for the management committee who are ordinary Sikhs elected usually for a couple of years to manage the Gurdwara for the community and, of course, there will be a toilet, usually separate facilities for women and men.