

11. SIKHISM

Chapter Overview

Sikhism is a vibrant religion and one that is becoming a global faith with large communities in Britain, Canada, the United States, Malaysia, and Singapore. This may be surprising since Sikhism does not actively seek new converts. Sikhs do not think of their faith as yet another sectarian religion. Rather, they understand their path as an expression of the universal truth within and beyond all religions. Consequently, they stress the universality of spirituality and the applicability of spirituality in day-to-day affairs. Not surprisingly, Sikhs do not consider their faith the only way to God. In fact, they share beliefs with Islam (monotheism) and Hinduism (reincarnation, karma). On the other hand, Sikhism has its own special history, independent revelation, and its own distinct quality.

The goals of the chapter are these:

1. To describe the defining characteristics of Sikhism
2. To present the history of this religion's development
3. To present major beliefs and contemporary practices of this religion

The sant tradition

The relationship between Hinduism and Islam deepened in northern India during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. Three factors help account for this. First was the work of the Hindu saint Ramananda, who engaged in theological debates with representatives of both religions. Second, a group known as **sants** or holy people shared a common cause in furthering devotion to the Beloved above all else, including transcending religious affiliations. Third, the most famous bridge between Hinduism and Islam was the weaver Kabir (1440-1518). He was born in a Muslim family but became the student of a Hindu guru, Ramananda. He used his work on a loom as the path to holiness. He wrote songs about the Divine and believed that doctrinal differences between traditions like Hinduism and Islam could be overcome especially in mystical experiences. He believed that different religions offered intimate contact with the same God. In the path of these bridge builders between Hinduism and Islam eventually came the Guru Nanak. His followers became known as Sikhs, which means "disciples, students, seekers of truth."

Guru Nanak

Guru Nanak was born in northern India in such an environment that offered exposure to both Hindu and Muslim ways of life. The Punjab was the region where invaders and conquerors of India had traditionally made their inroads, and as the geographic seat of political conflict, the area became the home of the religion of Sikhism. Nanak is described as having been a mystical, moody, child who was born into the Hindu tradition. Nanak's family passed on to him the profession of accountant. Although Nanak worked for a while as a bookkeeper, he did not enjoy his occupation. When he was thirty years old, he had a peak religious experience that occurred while he was in a river. The story tells us that Nanak remained in the river for three days where he encountered the presence of God. He was given a bowl of milk to drink; actually nectar, called amrit, which would give him power of prayer, love of worship, truth and contentment. He received an order from God to return to the world and to save people from the evil ages by teaching them to lead compassionate, holy lives.

Nanak traveled throughout India and Arabia to share his conversion experience. When people asked whether he was a Hindu or a Muslim, Nanak claimed that he was neither, but rather that he followed the path of God, and furthermore, that God was neither Hindu nor Muslim. He challenged some of the practices of both these traditions in an effort to make people think about the potential divisiveness of some ritual practices. He recommended that people attend more to inner than to outer practices. Among his teachings three stand out.

He continually professed that the path to God included (1) working hard in society to earn one's own living, (2) sharing one's earnings with the poor and needy, and (3) continually remembering that God is the only Doer, the only Giver.

The debate over whether Nanak should be a Muslim or a Hindu continued until his death in 1539. Before his death there were controversies about which religion would bury him. To settle the dispute, Nanak told Muslim followers to put flowers along one side of his body. He gave the same instructions to the Hindus, but told them to place flowers on the other side of his body. He declared that the flowers should be checked the next day. The flowers that remained the freshest would decide which religion would bury him. He and the flowers were then covered with a sheet. Tradition has it that on the next day, when they raised the sheet that covered his body, they found no corpse there, only the flowers, which were all still unblemished and fragrant.

The succession of gurus

Nanaka appointed a disciple, Angad Dev, as his successor. Angad Dev continued the Sikh tradition and passed along its teachings, which had developed in the common language. This is in contrast to Hinduism which was always taught in the orthodox language of Sanskrit. There were eventually a total of ten gurus. The second Guru stressed and modeled the Sikh virtues of service and humility. The Third and Fourth Gurus developed institutional structures for enlarging the church. The Fourth Guru established the holy city of Amritsar and built the Golden Temple, the most sacred shrine of the Sikhs. This temple still stands to this day. The Fifth Guru is credited with writing down the teachings of the Sikhs in the sacred scripture called the **Adi Granth**, which means original holy book, now known as the Guru Granth Sahib. After this guru was executed by the emperor's son for being suspected of political betrayal, Sikhism developed a military tradition as a means of defense. The Sixth Guru assembled a Sikh army, carried two symbolic swords with one signifying temporal power and one signifying spiritual power, and taught Sikhs to defend their faith. Loyalty and strength became urgent goals of the religion. The Seventh Guru was a tender-hearted pacifist more concerned with feeding the hungry and serving the needy than his army. The Eighth Guru, the Child Guru became a successor to Nanak when he was only five years old and died when he was eight. The Ninth Guru was martyred in 1675. His son succeeded him, becoming the Tenth Guru, Guru Gobind Singh. He is credited with turning anxious Sikhs into saint-warriors. Under his leadership the martial arts of Sikhism were developed, along with an emphasis on the sacred scriptures.

Central beliefs

Nanak is the primary source for the spiritual beliefs of Sikhs, although Guru Gobind Singh is credited with restructuring the religious community and emphasizing the importance of faith and discipline in order to resist tyranny and injustice. Here are the central Sikh beliefs explained in the chapter.

- Loving devotion to the One God who is worshiped by the many religions. God is truth (sat), God is the One Supreme Being (Ik Onkar). God has many names, but they are representations of the same power, which is beyond and present within all creation.
- God's light is present in the following: Guru Granth Sahib, shabd (God's Holy Word), and all of creation. God suffuses everything.
- There are many ways to God, not just one, and not just Sikhism.
- Sikhs share beliefs in common with Hinduism, specifically, karma and reincarnation.
- Sikhism is monotheistic.
- The soldier-saints pledge to protect the religious freedom of all people.
- Sikhism does not proselytize. The conversion of others is not a major interest.
- Sikhism opposes empty ritualism.
- God is present in all persons therefore everyone is to be treated equally. By way of contrast with Hinduism and its tradition of Brahmins, Sikhism teaches that all people should be treated equally. Sikhism denies the validity of Hinduism's caste system.
- The purpose of life is to reach mystical union with God. One seeks to realize God through the mundane, day-to-day routine of living, by engaging in sacrificial love, charity, worship, and work.

Sacred practices

The Khalsa is the sacred army of the Sikhs and has the responsibility to protect people in need. The men in the army allow their hair to grow long as a form of spiritual crown and wear it in a turban. They believe in exposing their heads only to God. They also wear a steel bracelet as a symbol of their unity with the divine power and their dedication. They always carry a sword to show that they are prepared to defend others. They also wear knee-length pants for modesty and a uniform to show their preparedness to fight. These accessories are called the 5-K s because their names in Indian all begin with the letter K.

Several practices of Sikhism originated with the intention of eliminating caste distinctions. For example, the langar is a communal eating ceremony to which everyone, regardless of social class, is welcome. During communal worship, all strata of people are free to sit together. This usually takes place in a gurdwara, the building where the Guru Granth Sahib is glorified and worshiped. The assembly is called sangat and within it all are equal. There is a ritual bathing in the tank of holy water at sacred Sikh places open to all, even Untouchables. Baptism into the Khalsa erases one's caste. Menial labor is extolled when it is done in God's service.

Being a devoted Sikh is demanding. It involves hours of daily prayer, continual inner repetition of Nam, the Name of God. About two hours are required for morning and evening prayers. Additionally, there is kirtan, the chanting of passages from the Guru Granth Sahib. Sikhs are also encouraged to begin the day with private meditations on the name of God. For the Khalsa there is even more such as abstaining from tobacco, alcohol, drugs, renouncing anger, criticism, lust, greed, ego, and attachment.

Sikhism today

The Punjab or Pakistan continues to be the center of Sikhism today. After the division of the Punjab in 1947, many Sikhs migrated to Britain, Canada, the United States, Malaysia, and Singapore. Recently, there has been a Sikh separatist movement that aims to establish an independent Sikh state called Khalistan. This movement has repeatedly clashed with Hindus. As the chapter points out, there have been several Sikh teachers who have moved to Western countries and have begun to attract some following. Today, the previously subdued ecumenical character of this religion has reemerged as one of its most dominant characteristics.

Key Terms

Sikhs	Udasis
shabd	sangat
sants	Sat
Nam	kirtan
Guru Granth	Sahib
Ik	langar
Onkar	gurdwara
Khalsa	