

Title: Conversations

Subtitle: Sikhism

Second Subtitle: Sikhism

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Quote:

Sikh Origins:

No consensus exists on the origins of this religion.

Historians and specialists in Eastern religions generally believe that Sikhism was originally related to the Bhakti movement within Hinduism and the Sufi movement within Islam. Many independent beliefs and practices were added.

Some Sikhs believe that their religion is a re-purification of Hinduism; that it is a continuation of the Hindu religious tradition.

Many Sikhs disagree; they believe that their religion is a direct revelation from God that was not derived from either Hinduism or Islam.

Sikhism does contain many unique postulates and principles that are quite different from Hinduism and Islam. Joseph D. Cunningham (1812-1851), the author of "A History of the Sikhs" (1848), observed: "It has been usual to regard the Sikhs as essentially Hindu in their religious and worldly aspiration, they are wholly different from other Indians, and their religion is an objective unknown elsewhere."

Sikh History:

The name of the religion means learner. It is often mispronounced 'seek' or 'se-ikh', with the final 'kh' sound like the 'kh' in Mikhail Gorbachev.

Its founder was Shri Guru Nanak Dev Ji, (1469-1538) who was born in the region that is now Pakistan. At Sultanpur, he received a vision to preach the way to enlightenment and was responsible for the saying "There is no Hindu, there is no Muslim" which became one of the pillars of Sikhism. He taught a strict monotheism, the brotherhood of all people, the equality of worship, and the Hindu concept of caste. Guru Nanak and Panth (his followers) built the first Sikh temple at Katarpur.

A succession of nine Gurus (regarded as reincarnations of Guru Nanak) followed during a period from Guru Nanak's death until 1708. At that time, the functions of the Panth and to the holy text, considered the 11th Guru.

Mogul emperors ruled a large area of South Asia from the 16th century until the 19th century. They attempted to convert the Sikhs to Islam, but were unsuccessful. One of the Sikh Gurus (considered by many Sikhs to have been the last guru) was Guru Gobind Singh, the entire country would have gotten circumcised" i.e.

In 1801, the Sikh state of Punjab was founded in Northern India by Maharaja Ranjit Singh. According to a historian Vincent Smith, "The Punjab State was neither a traditional monarchy, nor merely a dictatorship of one community over another. There was a partnership with other communities."

An invasion by Great Britain triggered the Sikh Wars (1845-1849). The British gained control over all of India. After independence in 1947, occupied India was divided into a mostly Muslim Pakistan and mostly Hindu India. A mass migration from Pakistan to India and a reverse migration of Muslims resulted, with immigrants having been seeking an independent homeland since the late 1940's.

Sikhs number about 22.5 million worldwide. 1 Most live in the Punjab. 2 In America, 1 of whom about 150,000 live in Canada. 2

Sikh Holy Texts:

The holy granth, the Shri Guru Granth, was initially compiled by the fifth Guru, Guru Arjan Dev Ji. Subsequently, it was updated to include the writings of the sixth to ninth Gurus. Guru Gobind Singh Ji assembled his writings separately into a number of books.

The holy granth consists of hymns and writings by the first nine Gurus, as well as writings of different Muslim and Hindu saints like: Kabir Ji, Baba Sheik Farid Ji, Baba Farid Dass Ji, etc. The Shri Guru Granth itself is considered the 11th and final religious text. It was made so by Shri Guru Gobind Singh Ji.

At least two English translations are available online:

"The Khalsa Consensus Translation [of the Guru Granth Sahib]...is regarded as being among the finest and most accurate English translation currently available online. <http://www.sikhs.org/english/frame.html>

Srigranth.org allows people to search the Sikh scriptures in English, Punjabi, and Transliteration.

Sikh Beliefs:

Beliefs include:

Goal: The goal of Sikhs is to build a close, loving relationship with God.
Deity: Sikhs believe in a single, Formless God, with many names, who can be reached through meditation. This concept is similar to Islam whose followers believe in a single deity with many names. Only he can be worshiped. Rahras, a Sikh evening prayer states: "At your feet, I do not care for anybody else. I do not follow the religious doctrines of any other religions believing in Ram, Mohammed, Puran or Qur'an. The Simritis, Shastras, and other religions down different doctrines. But I do not recognize any of these. O God, I have sought your grace and kindness. All that has been said is in fact spoken by you."
Reincarnation: They believe in samsara (the repetitive cycle of birth, life, and death).

accumulated sum of one's good and bad deeds, and reincarnation the belief in life after death. These beliefs are similar to Hinduism.

Caste system: Sikhs have rejected the caste system of the Hindu religion. In Sikhism, everyone has equal status in the eyes of God. This is a very important principle of Sikh beliefs, behaviors, and rituals.

Code of Conduct: During the 18th century, there were a number of attempts at a formal portrayal of Sikh customs. None received the support of most Sikhs. Sikhism started in 1931 to prepare the Reht Maryada -- the Sikh code of conduct. The only version authorized by the Akal Takht, the seat of supreme temporal authority, implementation has successfully achieved a high level of uniformity in the practices of Sikhism" 4 throughout the world. It contains 27 articles. Article 1 states: "Any human being who faithfully believes in

- (i) One Immortal Being,
- (ii) Ten Gurus, from Guru Nanak Dev to Guru Gobind Singh,
- (iii) The Guru Granth Sahib,
- (iv) The utterances and teachings of the ten Gurus and
- (v) the baptism bequeathed by the tenth Guru, and who does not owe allegiance to any other religion, is a Sikh."

There are a number of traditions within Sikhism. Thousands of Sikhs, both in India and elsewhere, follow living gurus who have lineages traceable back to Guru Gobind Singh. In other parts of the world, major strains are becoming evident between liberal and conservative interpretations of Sikh religion, as some Sikhs accommodate to the surrounding culture.

Sikh Practices:

Prayers: repeated multiple times each day.

Worship: Sikhs are prohibited from worshipping idols, images, or icons.

Temples: There are over 200 Gurdwaras (temples, shrines or holy places) in India. The most sacred is at Amritsar.

The Five K's: These are clothing practices followed by stricter Sikhs, called the Five K's:

Kesa (long hair, which is never cut)

Kangah (comb)

Kacha (short pants)

Kara (metal bracelet)

Kirpan (a ceremonial dagger)

The Khanda -- the Sikh symbol

The Khanda is the main Sikh symbol. It is seen at the top of this essay, www.hatisof5.com composed of five items, all traditional Sikh weapons:

A vertical double edged sword with a broad blade, also called a Khanda.

Two curved swords, called kirpans. They are called miri and piri, after the names of the personal kirpans by Guru Hargobind.

A ring called a chakker (aka chakram). It is a very effective weapon, with a diameter of 165 feet). This has been popularized in North America by the television

Princess.

The Khanda has been interpreted symbolically in many ways. one is:

"The Sikh emblem, Khanda, contains a ring of steel representing the Union Jack, a sword symbolizing God's concern for truth and justice, and two crossed swords outside to signify God's spiritual power." 6

Sikh Dispute Concerning Furniture:

A serious dispute has broken out among Sikhs in Canada. This has been a conflict between fundamentalists and moderates - terms that the media borrow from Christian terminology. Sikhs do not use these terms. For example, we do not recognize:

Sikhs: those who accept and follow all Sikh beliefs and practices, and
Non-practicing Sikhs: those who follow only some Sikh beliefs and practices. Fourth generation Sikhs in England and Canada are more likely to be into cutting their hair, and living a non-Sikh way of life than being a practicing Sikh.

Many persons considered by observant Sikhs as "non-practicing" believe in Sikhism but do not practice Sikhism. In this essay I use the terms "conservative" and "liberal" to describe the two divisions of the non-practicing group.

For 500 years, Sikhs had always sat on the floor, while eating after religious meals. This practice emphasizes the teachings of the Guru that every person is of equal value and that the Guru rejects elitism. A few decades ago, some Sikh Temples in Canada deviated from this practice and introduced tables and chairs. The tables and chairs are made identical in size and shape to the concept of equality. Still, the practice of eating at tables is considered a deviation from the conservative Sikhs.

In 1996, some Sikhs began calling for the removal of the tables and chairs and for sitting on the floor during meals. Some claim that the dispute over the furniture is the real reason for the dispute is that many Sikhs are weakening their faith and their religious practices. A riot broke out at the temple on 1997-JAN-11. Several Sikhs were killed in various crimes, from mischief to attempted murder. Many were injured, but no one was killed.

The Jathedar of the Akal Takhat Sahib is the individual who was elected by the members of the collective world-wide Sikh community. He is the final authority in the faith. In 1998-APR, he issued a hukamnama (edict) against the use of tables and chairs. They ruled that the furniture must be removed by 1998-MAY-29. This ruling was opposed by some Sikhs. Opposing the ruling cited a number of reasons why they prefer to not sit on the floor. The warm temperature in North America makes this uncomfortable, elderly people find it difficult to sit on the floor and younger members may refuse to be married in the temple if they had to sit on the floor. Sikh societies in the United States and England agreed to write to the Jathedar to appeal. The Ontario Gurudawaras Committee, which represents all 25 of the Gurudwaras in Ontario, wrote a letter to Bahai Ranjit Singh, Sikh's highest priest, calling his original

Sikh leaders asked members to remain calm until the matter is resolved.

The Akal Takhat reaffirmed the original edict. Thousands of Sikhs in the risked excommunication from their religion if they sat at tables to have their prayers on 1998-MAY-30. Leaders of 21 Sikh societies in British Columbia kept the furniture.

By 1998-JUN-8, three reform priests had been suspended for defying the edict. They have complained to the British Columbia Human Rights Commission, claiming they have been discriminated against on religious grounds. Meanwhile, most Sikh priests started a strike as of JUN-2 in order to persuade temple executives to reconsider the edict.

In mid 1998-JUL, five or six prominent liberal Sikhs were summoned to Akal Takhat to explain why they oppose a ban on tables and chairs. The group included five liberal Sikhs and three temple executives. They did not appear and were excommunicated. A disturbance broke out at North America's oldest Sikh temple: the Ross Street Khalsa Diwan Society in 1905. Conservative Sikhs tried to prevent a liberal executive member from addressing the congregation. On AUG-2, the temple remained closed until the police chief, Bruce Chambers, was able to broker a compromise between conservative and liberal Sikhs.

On 1998-NOV-18, Tara Hayer was killed by an unknown assassin. He was a liberal, of the liberal side, the publisher of a Sikh newspaper, and one of the 6 who were excommunicated.

During 1998-NOV and DEC, members voted in favor of liberal slates of candidates for positions within a number of Sikh temples in British Columbia. Jarnail Singh, a liberal, won at the Ross Street temple in Vancouver. He has called for a peacemaking conference and the first community-wide meeting in several years.

The current Sikh Jathedar (senior elected official) is Ranjit Singh. He has been in the United States in 1999-JAN. Liberal Sikhs appear concerned that his visit will create tensions in North America. They intervened with the U.S. authorities, pointing out that he had served a lengthy jail term in 1980 for murdering the leader of a rival sect. He has never renounced the use of violence against religious opponents. His visit was his last moment. A large ad in the Washington Post called on the U.S. president to inform immigration authorities, comparing Mr. Singh's status among Sikhs as comparable to that of a pope among Roman Catholics. Actually, he cannot really be compared to the pope. He does not represent the Sikh community, but was granted no higher spiritual authority.

The present Jathedar is Joginder Singh Vedanti