

Sikhism

S.T. 493 Eastern Religions and their
Impact on the Western World

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Charles L. Iles, Sr.

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SIKHISM - "THE WAY OF THE DISCIPLES"

There is a divergence of opinion among those who have studied Sikhism as to whether it is one of the world's newest major religions or just another version of Hinduism. Whichever may be true, there is general agreement that Sikhism does include aspects of other religions. Like Buddhism and Jainism, Sikhism does seem to mimic Hinduism in its theology and view of the world. It also seems to be an attempt to reform some aspects of Hinduism. However, Sikhism also incorporates key elements of Islam, which is, in its view of the world, entirely different than Hinduism. The resulting harmony, if it can be called that, is Sikhism.

The Sikhs have always been a minority religion in India, concentrated mainly in the Punjab Region in northwestern India, where 85% of all Sikhs live. Worldwide Sikhism may include as many as 16,000,000 adherents or as few as 9,000,000. It seems that the lesser figure is more accurate although exact membership figures are difficult to obtain. In addition to India, Sikh communities are located in Malaysia, Singapore, East Africa, Great Britain, Canada, and the United States of America.

Because of its relatively recent beginnings, Sikhism's historical background is quite clear. The Sikhs regard themselves as disciples of ten gurus, a line of religious leaders which began with Guru Nanak, who was born in 1469 A.D. and ending with the death of Guru Gobind Singh in 1708 A.D. The religious and cultural background of Nanak's

teachings may be traced to a devotional group within Hinduism, the Sants, who worshipped the god Vishnu. The Sants taught that Vishnu was the only reality in life and that everything else is just illusion. Their approach to god was through meditation, repeating Vishnu's name, and hymn singing, a most striking similarity to Sikhism. The Sants also rejected the Hindu caste system, perhaps understandably, since most of the Sants were from the lower castes of Indian society. Likewise, Sikhism also rejects the caste system.

The founder of Sikhism was a man named Nanak, who was born into a Hindu family in the warrior caste in the Punjab region of India. He was born in the village of Talmandi on the Rai River in present day Pakistan. According to one account in the "Birth Evidences", a non-canonical Sikh writing, Nanak could already assume the yogi position at the age of seven months, thus giving early evidence of spiritual enlightenment. What is certainly more likely is that Nanak's later teachings were formed and influenced by the teachings of both the Hindu and Muslim religions as he grew. He seems to have been a quiet, meditative boy whose interests were more in the areas of religion and poetry than hard work or business. As a young man Nanak was engaged at the age of twelve and married at nineteen. He became the father of two sons, worked as an accountant, the profession of his own father, and became friends with Mardana, a servant and musician of a Muslim official in a nearby town. Nanak, Mardana, and a group of friends began to gather daily for ceremonial bathing and the singing of religious songs which Nanak composed.

At the age of thirty Nanak received his "call", a vision of god, who told Nanak that he had been singled out as the prophet of the one true religion. From then on Nanak's message was, "There is only one true god, who is neither Hindu or Muslim." Because of this "call" and subsequent enlightenment Nanak rose to the status of a Guru, that is, someone who drives away darkness (Gu) by preaching enlightenment (ru).

Sikh tradition tells that Nanak made four missionary journeys throughout India and westward to Mecca, Medina, and Baghdad. It is more likely that he was a wandering missionary who spent little time outside of th Punjab region and may never have left India.

It was at about this time that life in northern India became difficult. In 1504, Babur, a Muslim conqueror from Central Asia occupied Afganistan and began a series of campaigns into northern India. The Muslim and Hindu kingdoms were swept aside and by 1525 the foundations of the Mughul Empire had been laid. Nanak was deeply troubled by the violence and cruelty of the times and in 1521 he undertook the establishment of a place of peace and stability. The result was that a religious center was established at Kartarpur and it was there that Nanak spent the remainder of his life, encouraging his followers to imitate his approach to god.

Near the end of his life Nanak chose a young man named Lehna, who was also from the warrior caste, to be his successor. In so doing Nanak passed over his own sons as unworthy to lead the community of

disciples. The exchange of power took place as follows: calling Lehna to him, Nanak gave his successor a coconut, which symbolized the universe, and five coins, which were representative of air, earth, fire, water and ether. Nanak then handed a book of hymns to Lehna together with a woollen sring which he was to wear around his waist. Finally, Lehna's name was changed to Angad and he became the second Guru of the Sikh religion.

Sikhism, as taught by Nanak, is monotheistic, but in a somewhat special way. According to Nanak god was, in his primal state, devoid of all attributes, absolute and unconditional. However, "The True Nane", as Nanak called god, endowed himself with certain attributes which brought him within the range of human understanding. This "incarnation" however was not at all similiar to the miracle of God's Son becoming a man. As in the Muslim faith, Nanak found the revelation of god in creation. He also spoke of god in terms of light and emphasized god's unity. He also taught that people are the foremost creation of god and rulers of creation. For this reason, Sikhs do not refrain from the eating of meat.

Despite this fact, namely that people are the foremost of all of god's creations, they are still naturally ruled by HAUMAI, that is evil passions. These passions have led to a sort of spiritual delusion which results in spiritual seperation from god. That condition can be reversed, Nanak taught, through the cooperative effort of god and man. All that is necessary is for the individual to lift his focus from this world to godd through the means of learning and meditation

upon the truth, as well as obedience to the truth, as it had been revealed through Nanak.

Ultimate salvation came in a union with god through his indwelling in a person's spirit.

From the death of Nanak in 1539 until the death of Gobind Singh in 1708 the development of Sikhism followed the lead of nine gurus who succeeded nanak. The first four of Nanak's successors did little more than simply follow in their leader's footsteps. Angad, the second guru, did develop a script and begin a compilation of Sikh scriptures. Amar Das, the third guru, had a well dug which subsequently became a Sikh shrine. The fourth guru, Ram Das, who enjoyed the favor of Akbar, the ruler of the Mughul Empire, obtained permission to establish a village near a pool of water of which Nanak was supposedly fond. That village grew into the city of Amritsar in which the Golden Temple was built. To this day, the city of Amritsar, which means Pool of Immortality, is the holy city of the Sikh religion.

Under Arjan, the fifth guru, both the office and the Sikh religion itself underwent significant changes. Arjan began the construction of the Golden Temple in Amritsar and enlarged the pool into what was in essence a man-made lake. He also gathered the hymns of the first four gurus, named the collection the Adi Granth, and enshrined Sikhism's holiest book in the Golden Temple. It was also under the leadership of Arjan and his son and successor, Hargobind, that Sikhism became militant. Because of the growing number of adherents to Sikhism the Mughul Empire demanded that Arjan remove from the Adi Granth anything and everything which might be objectionable to the Muslim faith.

When Arjan refused, he was arrested, tortured, and executed. Surrounded by bodyguards, Arjan's son, Gobind Singh became the next, and last, guru of the Sikh religion.

It was under the leadership of Gobind Singh that the Sikhs were formed into a new brotherhood of warrior/saints. In 1699 Gobind Singh called a gathering of all Sikh warriors and established the Khalsa, a Community of the Pure. Reminding his followers of their perilous position, Guru Singh called for five volunteers who would be willing to give their lives for the brotherhood because their god demanded a sacrifice of blood. The first man stepped forward and then walked into a nearby tent with GuruSingh. Seconds later Guru Singh emerged from the tent carrying a blood-stained dagger. Three more men stepped forward and one by one the process was repeated. Finally after the fifth man had stepped forward and walked into the tent with Guru Singh, the Guru emerged with all five men, alive and unharmed. Each man was then initiated into the new brotherhood. As part of the initiation each man received a drink of nectar, a two-edged dagger, and was identified by special symbols, which were known as the five K's. Those symbols are 1) that he is not to cut the hair on his head or shave his beard (Kesh) and 2) he carried a comb (Kangha). Each man 3) wore a steel bracelet (Kara), 4) a sword (Kirpan) and 5) short pants (Kaach) all as a sign of the brotherhood. Not only men, but also women, were welcome to be initiated into the Khalsa, as well as individuals of every caste. In this way Guru Singh opened the Sikh religion to people of every caste and there ^{are} was many who left the Hindu faith and embraced Sikhism.

When all four of Guru Singh's sons were assassinated, he pro-

claimed that the line of gurus would come to and end with his death. From then on there would only be the Khalsa and the Adi Granth to guide the Sikh religion.

Although the Khalsa is open to both men and women of every caste, it still comprises an elite segment of the Sikh community. Initiates to the Khalsa promise to bathe at dawn each day and spend time in meditation daily as well. They are to avoid liquor, tobacco, and narcotics and pledge their loyalty to the gurus and the Adi Granth.

After the death of the last guru, the Sikhs became more openly militant. In 1716 a Sikh ruler by the name of Banda Singh was captured and executed together with some seven hundred of his men. In 1799 the Sikhs captured the city of Lahore and made it the capitol of the Sikh kingdom of Ranjit Singh. This kingdom, which was avertaken by the British in 1839, dominated the Punjab region as well as most of northern India. It was during these years that many Sikh shrines were built as well as the Golden Temple of Amritsar.

When the Khalsa was finally crushed by the British in 1849 the Sikhs began a period of peace and prosperity which lasted nearly a century. That peace came to an end when India was granted independence in 1947. To their displeasure, the Sikh homeland of the Punjab was divided between Pakistan and India, depending on whether the Hindu or Muslim religion was predominant. The result was the death of more than a million people in a war between the Muslims and one side and the Sikhs and Hindus on the other. Eventually more than two and one-half million Sikhs were forced to move to East Punjab in India.

In more recent times, the Sikh religion was involved in blood

shed in connection with a movement toward independence for the Sikhs. In 1984 the Sikhs occupied the Golden Temple of Amritsar, demanding independence from India. When Prime Minister Indira Gandhi ordered the storming of the Golden Temple many Sikhs were killed together with Indian soldiers. And Prime Minister Gandhi was herself assassinated by one of her Sikh bodyguards in retaliation.

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