

The Sikhs and Their Religion

THE SETTING

Guru Nanak, the founder of the Sikh Panth ("path"), was born in Panjab, India in 1469 A.D., only a few years before the birth of Martin Luther and Columbus' arrival in America. At that time the Muslims were in the process of extending their rule in India, including Panjab. While many Hindus and Muslims had learned to co-exist peacefully, bitter animosities often shattered the peace, especially whenever a Muslim ruler sought to impose Islamic control over the non-Muslim population.

GURU NANAK

Born into a high caste Hindu family, Nanak proved to be a precocious child. He studied under both Hindu and Muslim teachers but showed little interest in formal education, preferring rather to be alone or in the company of holy men. Neither marriage and family nor a regular job seemed to bring him back to the concerns of this world.

It was an age, we are told, when "justice had taken wings and fled. In this completely dark night of falsehood the moon is never seen to rise." In company with a Muslim musician, Mardana, he organized hymn singing in the town. During his morning ablutions he felt that he had received a call from God:

Nanak, he whom you bless will be blessed by me; he to whom you are benevolent shall receive my benevolence. I am the Great God, the Supreme Creator. Thou art the Guru, the Supreme Guru of God.

For three days Nanak disappeared. After he returned home, he gave away all he had and joined the company of wandering holy men. In their company he uttered and reiterated these words which form the core of his message: "There is no Hindu; there is no Muslim." Especially averse to divisions in religion that thrived upon a concern for external objects and concentration upon them, he encouraged their followers to an interiorization of faith and to a truer devotion to God in order to revive the inner light within themselves.

Guru Nanak's missionary journeys, some in the company of Mardana, took him to all the ends of India, including Sri Lanka. It is said that he went as far as Baghdad and, disguised in Muslim garb, even made the Muslim pilgrimage to Mecca. At times he was attacked and endured imprisonment. On other occasions he made numerous converts.

Later in life, however, Guru Nanak settled in Kartarpur, shedding the garments of an ascetic wanderer in favour of those of the village householder. Here, by inculcating his own teachings and devotions into the hearts of his devotees, he established the foundations of a community that eventually considered itself unique and distinct from other religious communities.

Yet a legacy of Sikh association with other religious communities has always persisted. We are informed that when Guru Nanak was about to die, he proceeded to the bank of a river near his native place, accompanied by both Hindus and Muslims. Then he ordered both groups to set flowers alongside him, the Hindus on one side and the Muslims on the other. Those whose flowers remained fresh, he said, could claim him.

After the whole assembly sang praises to God, Guru Nanak covered himself with a sheet. The next day when the sheet was removed, nothing was found under it. The flowers on both sides remained fresh!

THE TEN GURUS

Of vital importance to Sikhs are the ten Gurus (religious teachers). Though with the help of a good guru anyone can attain a high spiritual level, the ten Gurus are especially distinguished by their exceptional experience of God. All ten of them, though individually differing from each other, possess the same original Spirit, like ten separate torches bearing the same original flame.

Nanak, the first Guru, appointed his successor, who in turn was followed by the remaining Gurus in direct succession. The fourth Guru centred the Sikh community and its activities in Amritsar, in which the Golden Temple, Sikhism's key shrine, was subsequently located. By selecting his son as his successor, he established the principle of choosing a successor within the family. The fifth Guru

initiated the compilation of the *Granth Sahib*, the Sikh holy book. The sixth Guru, faced with the growing militancy of the Mughal rulers, developed the community along military lines and chose the sword as a symbol of his leadership. Under the ninth Guru especially, Sikhism extended its influence in various parts of India.

It was the tenth Guru, Gobind Singh, who culminated the transformation of the community which his more immediate predecessors had begun in order to counter the designs of the Muslim emperors to expand the Mughal Empire. He welded his people into a valiant family called the *khalsa* ("pure"), of whom the first five initiates gave adequate proof of their readiness to die for their leader. "The sparrows had become hawks."

Prior to his death in 1708, the tenth Guru announced that after him the *Granth Sahib* would serve as the permanent Guru for the Sikh community. In turn the Sikh community, moulded by the Spirit of the Guru Granth Sahib, was to serve as its worthy custodian, its preserver and proclaimer.

GOD AND MAN

The *Japji* (meditation) of Guru Nanak, found at the beginning of the Sikh scriptures and memorized by countless Sikhs as their quintessence, begins:

In the beginning was the True One, in the early age was the True One.

The True One is, and will be forever, Nanak says. By thinking He comes not in the understanding, Even if thought of a hundred thousand times, By keeping silent He comes not in the silence, Even if concentration is unbroken.

The hunger of the hungry is not assuaged Even though he conquers the worlds. Hundreds of thousands of schemes may be made, But not one goes along (to God).

How can we find truth, how can the wall of falsehood be broken down?

By walking according to the will of the Creator, As preordained for us, says Nanak.

By His will forms exist, yet His will cannot be explained,

By His will living creatures exist, by His will they obtain greatness;

By His will come exaltation and debasement.

By His written order pain and pleasure are obtained.

By His will some obtain favour,

By His will others wander forever (in rebirths);

Within His will are all, none is outside His will.

Nanak says, if anyone discerns His will

He will never even mention his own pride (vs. 1, 2).

Make self-restraint the workshop; patience, the goldsmith;

Reason, the anvil; wisdom, the hammer;
Fear, the bellows; the fire, austerities;
The crucible, love, in which the nectar melts;
In this true mint the message is coined.
This is the practice of those on whom His glance rests;
Nanak says, in the glance of the Bountiful is bliss (v. 33).

God is one. His name is Truth. He is self-existing, immortal, the Creator, free from transmigration, unlike anything else.

God creates the world, including mankind. More accurately, the world and everything in it is an emanation of God. While He is separate from it, yet He indwells it, shapes it, preserves it. (Generally Sikhs, unlike many Hindus, have recognized the importance of history, including the origin and development of their community.)

Why has God created the world? And why does man seem separate from God, ignorant and happily independent of Him, obsessed with worldly things, ensnared by the five evils of lust, covetousness, attachment, wrath and pride, wandering blindly in this world without purpose and meaning? Sikhs might respond that God has willed it and He alone knows why.

But God has provided a way of liberation. To bring order out of chaos and to attain enlightenment Sikhs must seek the services of the Guru. Then they can experience their unity with God and truly worship Him, recognizing Him not only as transcendent but as immanent, even within themselves — like the eye which perceives not only objects outside itself but its power of perception to indwell the eye itself. Could it be said that descent into the heart is ascent into mystical union with the True One, and that therein lies the destination of the pilgrim's journey?

For many Sikhs, God, who is impersonal and indescribable, is also God who is personal, possessing attributes. They seek His forgiveness and salvation by meditating upon His Name, always aware that their meditation and its intent is by His grace. At the same time, however, they uphold the Hindu doctrines of *karma* (the good and evil acquired by one's actions) and a consequent series of deaths and rebirths which *karma* entails, until they are totally free from evil and experience their unity with the Absolute.

The Being of God, the nature of this creation, the perversity of man, the path and stages to his liberation and enlightenment, the character of eternal bliss: Here space has allowed us to consider these and other aspects of Sikh understanding in a superficial manner only. Would it not be better to encourage the individual Sikh to explain his understanding of his personal relation to God?

THE KHALSA

Every Sikh ("disciple") should aim at becoming a soldier-saint by joining the *khalsa*. Usually at about the age of puberty, he enters the *khalsa* through a "baptismal" rite in which he shares in a nectar (*amrit*) that has been stirred by a sword in an iron basin. Every member of this fellowship is surnamed Singh ("lion") and adopts the five "K's": *kesha*, the uncut hair; *kangha*, comb; *kachcha*, military knee pants; *kara*, steel bracelet and *kirpan*, sword. A woman who enters the *khalsa* is surnamed *kaur* ("princess").

It is no coincidence that Sikhs "can be recognized from afar". That is what Guru Gobind Singh wanted.

The *khalsa* member is to lead a life of prayer, strive after righteousness and abstain from alcohol, tobacco, narcotics, the flesh of an animal that has been bled to death and sexual relations with any one other than one's spouse. A member who cuts his hair may be considered to be a renegade.

Sikhs have always rejected India's traditional caste system, at least many of its social and religious implications. Even outcastes, as well as members of lower castes, have been admitted into the *khalsa*. As Sikhs may say, they too need and can receive the enlightenment provided by God's grace through the Guru; their caste need be no obstacle to their salvation. But, as also evidenced by some Sikh humour tinged with irony, not all caste distinctions have been obliterated. Nor do all Sikhs, including many among higher castes, seek admission into the *khalsa*.

GRANTH SAHIB

Continuing the work of a previous Guru, Guru Gobind Singh compiled a final version of the Sikh scriptures called the *Adi Granth* (first book) or, more popularly, the *Granth Sahib* and ordered that these scriptures serve as the authoritative and eternal Guru for the Sikh community. In a sense the name *Granth Sahib* (*granth* is a Sanskrit word meaning "book" and *sahib* is an Arabic word meaning "master") reveals the composite nature of its authorship and content. A volume of about 1500 pages in 6 languages, it contains hymns of a devotional nature which are also replete with instruction and exhortation. Its authors include especially the works of many of the Gurus as well as some by Hindu saints and Muslim mystics. In Biblical terms its poetic style is reminiscent of the Psalms and Proverbs. Sikhs constantly recite its verses in public and in private, on occasions as a team intoning it from beginning to end.

Naturally Sikhs hold the *Granth Sahib* in great reverence, for it is also their personal and permanent Guru. The same Spirit that indwells the Gurus indwells these scriptures. Yet neither the Gurus nor the scriptures are to be worshipped, since worship belongs to God alone.

A separate volume, the *Dusam Granth*, contains the writings of the tenth Guru and is less revered than the *Granth Sahib*.

THE TEMPLE

Some would say that among India's many architectural wonders the Sikh Golden Temple in Amritsar ranks second only to the Taj Mahal in grandeur and beauty. Whenever and wherever possible, any Sikh community in some numbers will construct a temple, called *gurdwara* ("the door to the guru"). In it there are no images, no altar, no order of worship: only the *Granth Sahib* before which the Sikh bows and around which he walks, and which is frequently chanted from cover to cover by a relay of qualified persons. Before entering the temple, shoes are removed and the head is covered.

The temple functions as a centre of community activity as well as a place for worship. Its kitchen is open for all to join in a common meal, for anyone who is hungry. These actions symbolize the Sikh ideals of fellowship and generosity, especially as they cut across traditional Indian caste barriers.

THE SIKH COMMUNITY

Sikhs probably number less than 15 million throughout the world. They are found in Malaysia, Singapore, East Africa, England and North America, as well as in India. But they remain concentrated in and around the Indian state of Panjab where the movement originated, though some of them are scattered throughout this nation. They probably form no more than two percent of India's total population.

But wherever Sikhs are, their influence seems out of proportion to their numbers. Many are well educated, energetic and enterprising in industry and agriculture. The present president of India (1984) is a Sikh. They have excelled as soldiers. Under the British they served with distinction and have claimed more Victoria crosses than any other East Indian community. Recently an officer of the Peel Regional Police, himself from England, credited a Sikh with saving the life of his mother some years ago.

No doubt, Guru Nanak preached peace, tolerance and harmony among the people of different religions in India. In fact, however, the Sikhs have emerged in due time as a distinct religious and political community. Whatever the circumstances, they have tended to align themselves more readily with Hindus against, in their view, the Muslim oppressors. Yet at times they have resisted what they have perceived to be Hindu attempts to absorb them, politically, socially and religiously. Nevertheless, history has demonstrated that they too as a minority group can live with other communities in peace and harmony.

Probably most Sikhs would agree that the major problems of Sikh identity and community unity

stem from within the community itself. Disputes often focus on the control of the *gurdwaras*. Just as important is their response to the significant numbers of Sikhs who have abandoned the external marks of the community discipline (the beard, turban, etc.), not only in the West but even in India. Can an unrecognizable Sikh be a Sikh?

SIKHS IN CANADA

Following the Chinese and the Japanese, the Sikhs were the first East Indian community to enter Canada as British subjects at the beginning of the present century. They worked in logging camps, lumber mills, mines and on the railways, often enduring great hardship.

With the larger influx of Asians into Canada during the past two decades Sikh numbers also have swelled. At present some 100,000 or more reside in Canada, particularly in British Columbia, Ontario and Alberta and in the cities of Vancouver and Toronto. *Gurdwaras* are found in these and other cities where Sikhs are present in significant numbers. While Sikhs seldom carry on an aggressive missionary outreach among other communities anywhere, some traditional Canadians have entered into the Sikh fold.

No doubt, Sikhs have experienced the prejudice of the majority Anglo-Saxon community, especially in the earlier years of their history in Canada. Canada's official records consistently refer to them as Hindus! On the other hand, as a Sikh publication in Canada notes, there were those of other communities who wrote and spoke for the Sikh cause. And, as this publication continues, Sikhs have equal opportunity today in Canada and are proud of being Sikh and Canadian.

A CHRISTIAN RESPONSE: A FEW CLUES

Like all East Indians, Sikhs too appreciate a friendly greeting and simple courtesy. Ask them about their customs and culture, their country and history. If possible invite them into your home. Many of them have few or no diet restrictions. If you visit their homes, remove your shoes before entering, and respect all objects which they reverence.

Many Sikhs freely talk about religion. They often place pictures of Guru Nanak and Guru Gobind Singh in their homes. Some will also have a copy of the Granth Sahib. You might ask if they possess a copy of the New Testament or a Gospel portion. They may welcome a copy in English or in Panjabi (Gurmukhi script) or even Hindi.

Or, given an appropriate situation, you might ask your Sikh friend about his religious values and how his personal life conforms to them. Is there a gap between his ideals and his performance of them? — a question the questioner should have previously asked himself also! It would appear that distinct and

cogent analogies exist between Sikh and Christian portrayals of the spiritual plight of the individual person and of corporate mankind.

Sadhu Sundar Singh is one of the more notable converts from Sikhism to Christianity. His life-story and some of his personal writings, translated into English, are available and may be of interest to some of your Sikh friends. In fact, his writings provide simple but edifying reading for anyone. Two samples from *With and Without Christ*:

Without Christ I was like a fish out of water, or like a bird in the water. With Christ I am in the ocean of Love, and while in the world, am in heaven (Eph. 2:5, 6) (p. 72).

Without Christ I was without hope and full of fear about the future life. Now, by His presence, He has turned fear into love, and hopelessness into realization; and fear is transitory, but love is eternal. Faith and love are the tendrils of the soul, which, in the light and heat of God's sun, grow towards heaven, and cling round the Lord of Love; but without Him, hopeless and in the dark, they wither away and die (p. 59).

A Brief Bibliography (on which much of this essay depends):

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