

#5 Sikhism

Sikhism is a world religion with about 18 million followers. Most live in the Punjab region of northwestern India, but many also live in a Sikh diaspora throughout the world. Several different Sikh sects have evolved in the religion's 500-year history, but all Sikhs are united in their belief in one god, their reverence for the original 10 gurus, and their belief in the teachings of Sikh scripture, the *Granth Sahib*, or *Adi Granth*. Although scholars often describe Sikhism as a Hindu reform movement or a blend of Hinduism and Islam, Sikhs reject those descriptions and claim that their religion springs from the divine inspirations of Guru Nanak and the nine succeeding Sikh gurus.

The History of Sikhism

Guru Nanak was the first guru and the founder of Sikhism. Many people—both Hindu and Muslim—in the Punjab region became his followers. When Nanak died in 1538 or 1539, the second of 10 gurus, Guru Angad, succeeded him as leader of the fledgling religious movement. The gurus consolidated and institutionalized many aspects of Sikhism and shaped a social, political, and religious life for the movement. Sikh warriors hastened the collapse of the Mughal Empire during the 18th century and were able to carve out a kingdom in the Punjab under the leadership of Ranjit Singh by the end of the century. However, when Singh died in 1839, the kingdom soon collapsed and was absorbed by the British Empire following Great Britain's victories in the Anglo-Sikh Wars. The Sikhs continued their military tradition and served the Indian and British armies. In gratitude for their service during World War I, the British awarded land to the Sikhs. A series of disturbances ensued, and soon the Sikhs became involved in Mohandas Gandhi's freedom movement. In tragic irony, independence proved disruptive for the Sikhs, who saw their community divided between India and Pakistan. Widespread bloodshed forced millions of Sikhs to emigrate from Pakistan to India. In 1984, the Indian government reacted to Sikh separatist violence by perpetrating the Golden Temple massacre of hundreds of Sikhs. The subsequent assassination of Prime Minister Indira Gandhi by a Sikh and the ensuing riots led to the deaths of many more Sikhs. Today, the Sikhs remain a major force in Indian politics and the professional classes, and in May 2004, Manmohan Singh became India's first Sikh premier.

The Elements of Sikhism

Sikhism is based on a discipline of purification aimed at controlling five vices: greed, anger, false pride, lust, and an attachment to material goods. The success of a person in adhering to Sikh practices allows the person to elevate his soul into union with the god Sat Nam, an omniscient, ever-present, characterless, and infinite being who is the source of all things. Sikhs worship Sat Nam by pursuing the ideals of contentment, honesty, compassion, and patience. At the end of a person's life, the tally of good and bad conduct determines the family, race, and character of the person when he or she is reborn as another human being. Those who are selfish and cruel in this life will suffer in their next existence. Those who act with compassion and honesty will achieve positions of good standing and high character. The soul develops through countless lives until it becomes united with God.

The Sikh holy book is the *Granth Sahib*, or *Adi Granth*. It consists of three principal sections. The first is the *Japji*, which recites the teachings of Guru Nanak. The second is the *Ragas* (meaning "tunes"). The final section consists of 26 books that elaborate on the *Ragas*. The *Granth Sahib* is treated with great reverence by Sikhs. It serves as the focal point of Sikh temples, where the book is always installed with great ceremony. Daily readings are part of the obligatory duties of a Sikh household. Many Sikhs recite verses during their daily rituals, which include a morning bath and meditation. Four main ceremonial events mark a Sikh's life: naming as an infant, initiation, marriage, and death. The naming takes place soon after the birth of a child. In the initiation ceremony, the child (who is between eight and 15 years old) becomes a full member of the Sikh community. The ritual is a baptismal ceremony preparing him or her to become responsible for abiding by Sikh religious practices. The third major ceremony is marriage, which symbolizes the eternal union with Sat Nam. The final ceremony occurs at the person's death. After the body is cremated, a service is held for relatives of the deceased, which is followed by a ceremony at the person's home or at the temple, where a continuous reading of the *Granth Sahib* is held. There are many different ceremonies held by Sikhs to celebrate the birth and death of the 10 gurus, two events to commemorate the deaths of martyrs, and a festival marking the anniversary of the *Baisakhi*, the date that the Khalsa brotherhood (the dominant order of Sikhism) was founded. Those events are marked by 48-hour readings of the *Granth Sahib* from start to finish. There are several different Sikh sects that place different emphasis on the three fundamental precepts of Sikhism: reverence for the 10 gurus, the oneness of God, and the divine revelation of the *Granth Sahib*. Some groups, like Sigh Sabha, promote education to elevate the standing of Sikhs in the world. Another sect, the Nirankari, pursues the worship of Sat Nam in its original pristine form. The Udasis are an order of holy men who pursue an ascetic life similar to that of Jain monks and wander as beggars. The Sahajdharis reject the use of force.

The best-known group in the West is the Singhs, who take their inspiration from the last guru, Gobind Singh. The Singhs adhere to the principles of the Khalsa brotherhood, which was created to protect Sikhs from persecution. All Singhs are baptized in a special ceremony and carry the distinguishing marks, all of which begin with the letter "k": *kirpan* (a dagger), *kesa* (uncut hair), *kangha* (comb), *kacch* (short pants), and *kara* (a steel bracelet worn on the right wrist). The Singhs also refrain from using alcohol or tobacco and eat meat only from animals slaughtered in a respectful way

Sikhism Questions:

1. Most followers of Sikhism reside in what region of northwestern India?

2. Scholars suggest Sikhism is a blend of Hinduism and what?

3. The Sikh holy book is called the what?

4. What are the three sections of the Granth Sahib?

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5. What are the four ceremonial events in a Sikh's life?

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| 1. | 3. |
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6. Between what ages does initiation occur?

7. What is the best-known group of Sikhs in the West?

8. Singhs adhere to the Khalsa Brotherhood, which protects them from what?

9. What 5 distinguishing marks do Singhs have?

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| 1. | 4. |
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| 3. | |

10. What are the fundamental precepts of Sikhism?

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| 1. | 3. |
| 2. | |

11. What is the date that Khalsa Brotherhood was founded?

12. What do Singhs refrain from using?