

# CIS Bulletin: Sikhism

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## Introduction

**Official Name:** Sikhism (pronounced “seek-ism”). The term “Sikh” comes from the Sanskrit word *shishya* meaning follower, disciple, learner, a seeker of truth.

**Founders:** Guru Nanak Dev Ji (1469-1539) and nine successive gurus until 1708. Sikhs celebrate the births and deaths of various gurus, although gurus are not worshipped.

**Central Shrine:** The Golden Temple (completed in 1601) in the Pool of Immortality at Amritsar, in the Punjab region of India is the central shrine for Sikhs. The leader of the Golden Temple is the final arbiter in doctrinal and ritual matters for all Sikhs. Worship takes place at the temple from about 4:00 a.m. until midnight.

The temple was destroyed by Afghans in 1762, but rebuilt in 1764. It was seriously damaged in 1984 in conflicts between Sikhs and the Indian government.

**Adherents:** Sikhs number an estimated 18 million, mostly in Punjab region of India, although over two million have immigrated to Western Europe, North America and several former British colonies. An estimated 250,000 Sikhs live in the United States and worship in 50 *gurdwaras*, or worship and community centers.

The Atlanta, Georgia, *gurdwara* is located near Stone Mountain. The largest Sikh ashram (spiritual center) in the U.S. is located in Espanola, New Mexico. The U.S. head-quarters of the Sikh Dharma is Los Angeles. The Sikh faith arrived in the USA over 150 years ago.

Male Sikhs take the name “Singh,” which means “lion,” while female Sikhs take the name “Kaur,” which means “princess.” Male Sikhs are recognized by their beards and turbans.

**Major U.S. Leader:** Yogi Bhanan (1929-2004) founded the 3-HO (Healthy, Happy, Holy) Organization in 1969. During his life he started yoga centers and real estate concerns, as well as the Golden Temple natural foods company, Yogi herbal teas operation, Soothing Touch health and beauty products and Peace natural cereals. His Sikh Dharma was legally incorporated in the USA in 1971. (Dharma is a Sanskrit word with several meanings, including religion, duty, law and custom.)

**Scripture:** *Adi Granth* (or *Guru Granth Sahib*) is the tenth Guru and the official canonical scripture for Sikhs. Guru Gobind Singh Ji proclaimed the *Granth Sahib*, with 5,894 verses on 1,430 pages, the last Guru, hence its name. (*Sahib* is a title of respect Sikhs use for places, items and people.) It is believed to be the only “authentic universal holy scripture.” The *Adi Granth* is the central object of worship and ritual for Sikhs. It is read at various times such as at weddings when the bride and groom circumambulate the *Adi Granth* while reciting a hymn from its text.

The *Adi Granth* is normally opened (awakened) in the morning and closed (put to rest) in the evening. This practice may be traced to the Hindu practice of awakening and putting their deities to bed each day.

The *Adi Granth* is of supreme importance to Sikhs and must be installed in an elaborate ceremony at the *gurdwara*. Most Sikhs have

only a part of the *Adi Granth*, called the *gutka* and containing only the passages used in daily prayers, in their homes.

Two other scriptures are also important to Sikhs: the *Dasam Granth* and the *Janam Sakhis*, the latter of which celebrates the life and works of Guru Nanak.

**Beginnings:** Sikhism arose in India in the late fifteenth century during a period of religious turmoil and struggle between militant Muslims and ascetic Hindus. Sikhs deny their faith is a blend or reproduction of earlier religions, insisting it is a new revelation from the One Supreme God. However, most scholars see Sikhism as a “middle-way” between militant Islam and ascetic Hinduism.

A number of sects has arisen over the years within Sikhism. Some Sikhs may identify more with one Guru than another, or differ on the color or length of their garments, or the necessity of shaving the face or cutting the hair.

Sikhs participated in the 1993 Parliament of the World’s Religions in Chicago, Illinois.

## Teachings Of Sikhism

**Mool Mantar:** The *Mool Mantar* (literally “the root verse”) is a hymn composed by Guru Nanak and sums up the basic beliefs of Sikhs. It is the first verse in the *Guru Granth Sahib*. Every Sikh is expected to recite it each day. Its English translation is:

There is only one God  
His Name is Eternal Truth  
He is the Creator of all  
He is without fear  
He is without hate  
He is beyond time  
His spirit pervades the Universe  
He is beyond birth and death  
He is self-existent  
He is realized (known) by the Guru’s grace.

**God:** Sikhism adopted the Muslim teaching that God is the One Supreme Being and Creator. “Like Thee there is no other. Thou art in all ages the only One.” Nanak used the Arabic word for God, *Allah*, as well as the names of Hindu deities. The chief name for God in Sikhism is “*Sat nam*,” meaning “True Name.” Sikhism, like Islam, uses impersonal terms to describe God and defines God as Truth or Reality. God is infinite and formless. God is both Personal and Impersonal. He is beyond human reach until He reveals Himself through creation.

The *Mool Mantar* teaches that God is also supreme, omnipresent, and beyond birth and death. Sikhism teaches that God cannot assume any physical form or be incarnated in human form, but manifested his attributes in the ten Gurus. God is unknowable except through the Gurus.

**Gurus:** Gurus in Sikhism are enlighteners and messengers who appear in human form when necessary. Their goal is to free people’s minds from bigotry and superstition, dogmas and rituals, so they can be one with God.

**Mankind:** Mankind is the epitome of God's creation. Although separated from God, mankind has the conscious awareness to reach the desired spiritual goal. Through the Granth Sahib, mankind can escape *maya* (materialism) and arrive at the ultimate destination which is absolute, uninterrupted bliss.

Sikhism rejects the resurrection of the body. Instead, the soul is reincarnated through various lower species (8.4 million times) before reaching the human level. *Karma*, the Hindu teaching of the law of cause and effect, continually operates on the soul and determines whether the human advances or falls back in the cycles of birth and rebirth. Liberation from the cycles of birth and death can take place while in the body as a result of a sincere eagerness to serve God.

Sikhs practice a form of baptism to become *Khalsa* ("pure ones") in a ceremony established in 1699. Water is stirred with a double-edged sword, symbolizing courage and heroism, to which sugar-puffs, symbolizing humility, has been added, while reciting verses from the *Adi Granth*. Afterwards, some of the liquid is sprinkled on the hair and in the eyes and some is drunk.

**The Sikh Code of Discipline:** A Sikh is supposed to avoid the five primary sins of lust, pride, anger, greed and undue worldly attachment. Adultery is forbidden. All women (other than a wife) are to be treated as a mother, sister, or daughter.

Sikhism rejects the dietary restrictions of Judaism, Islam and Hinduism, barring only foods that "disturb the mental and bodily tranquility." Followers are forbidden to use intoxicants, including tobacco and alcohol.

Trimming, shaving or removing hair from the body is forbidden in the Sikh code of discipline; however, not all Sikhs follow the code.

**Salvation:** Sikhism teaches there are many different paths to God, the destination of all religions. Salvation is seen as a union with or absorption into God, rather than communion with Him while retaining individual identity.

In Sikhism, singing or reciting the names of God are superior forms of meditation designed to lead the consciousness into the presence of God. The solution to the human predicament is to become God-centered. Sikhs practice *bhakti* (love or devotion to God) which was borrowed from Hindu *yoga* of the same name. As long as the Sikh follows the Five Ks and the Sikh code of discipline, he will win glory. Indifference to these requirements will hamper his progress.

The *Adi Granth* speaks of heaven and hell as well as God's kindness and grace to those who worship Him. Some Sikhs may refer to a Sikh paradise using the Buddhist term Nirvana.

**The Five Ks:** The five sacred Sikh symbols are commonly known as the "Five Ks" because they start with the letter K representing *kakka* in the Punjabi language. Both baptized men and women wear the Five Ks. They are:

- *Kes* or unshorn hair, regarded as a symbol of saintliness and spirituality and as living in harmony with the will of God. Cutting hair is taboo for the Sikh, but is not rigidly followed by all Sikhs.
- *Kangha* or the comb is necessary to keep the hair clean and neat. A Sikh is supposed to comb his hair twice daily and tie his turban neatly. Turbans are worn as protection for the hair, and for social identity and cohesion.
- *Kara* or a steel wrist band symbolizes restraint from evil deeds. It is worn on the right wrist to remind the Sikh of the vows taken not to do anything which would bring shame or disgrace on himself or his faith. The *Kara* also reminds the Sikh that he/she is a servant of God.

- *Kacch* (from which the English word "khaki" comes) or soldier's shorts must be worn at all times. The cotton shorts remind the Sikh of his/her commitment to chastity and procreation.

- *Kirpan* or sword is the symbol of courage and self-defense, and reminds the Sikh of his commitment to defend the poor, the weak and the innocent. Although pacifist in theory, Sikhism teaches, "When all other means have failed, it is righteous to draw the sword."

The requirement of all baptized Sikhs to wear a *kirpan* has brought arrests of a number of Sikh students who wore their *kirpan* to school.

A 23-year-old Wayne State University student was arrested for carrying a *kirpan* on the university campus in 2005. He was later acquitted of carrying a weapon.

In another court case, a student was allowed to wear an eight-inch long *kirpan* (length of the blade and handle), as long as it was secured in a sheath and hidden under his clothing.

The Five Ks and the turban constitute the Sikh uniform, and are a reminder of vows made at the time of baptism and a testimony of his/her faith as a Sikh.

**Worship:** Worship consists of the singing of hymns, reading from the *Adi Granth* and sermons. The *Adi Granth* is honored in the same way as a human Guru; it is kept under a canopy on top of a throne. A sacred whisk is waved over the *Adi Granth* whenever it is read or carried in a procession. It is covered with a decorative cloth when not in use. When approaching the *Adi Granth*, persons must wash their hands, prostrate themselves before it, be barefoot and have the head covered. Persons arriving without head covering will be provided suitable covering. All persons sit on the floor as a sign of equality. Worshippers may leave an offering of milk, fruit or money, and when leaving, may not turn away from the *Adi Granth*. There is very little formal liturgy and no taking of "sacraments" in Sikhism.

There is no regular or weekly holy day; some *gurdwaras* emphasize the first day of the lunar month. The *gurdwara* in Stone Mountain, Georgia, meets every Sunday. After the religious service, a communal meal is served, symbolizing the equality of all persons before God. The communal vegetarian meal is central to the Sikh community and is always offered free to all who come, regardless of caste or status. Sikh women are considered equal to men, but men and women normally sit on opposite sides of the room.

Sikh festivals include anniversaries associated with the births or deaths of the Gurus.

**The Sikh symbol (*Khanda*):** There are three symbols in the Sikh symbol, the *khanda*. The two-edged sword symbolizes God's concern for truth and justice; the two outer swords symbolize God's spiritual and temporal power, and the circle represents the unity of God.

**Conclusion:** Sikhs are a small minority in India and have experienced governmental, economic, and religious discrimination at the hands of the Hindu majority. In June 1984, 38 Sikh temples, including the Golden Temple, the holiest of Sikh shrines, were attacked by Hindus. Since that attack, Sikhs claim over 110,000 followers have been killed by Indian government forces, while thousands of Sikhs have been jailed. (During a session of the 1993 Parliament of the World's Religions, this writer observed a group of angry Hindus rush toward the stage after a Sikh speaker mentioned the deaths of so many Sikhs in India. Security personnel prevented any violence.)

On October 7, 1987, Sikhs in the Punjab region declared independence and formed the separate country of Khalistan. The effort has not been recognized by India or the rest of the world.