

Our Sikh Neighbours



Why is Sikhism Important?

In the spirit of Vatican II we continue our exploration of other Faiths, seeking elements we have in common. Above all seeking to know and understand our neighbours in Britain and discover ways of extending hands in friendship to them as the Church urges and the Pope in his teaching and by his example encourages us to do.

Although Sikhism consists mainly of people from the Panjab in India, the Sikhs form an important community of faith of about 500,000 in Britain today. In the following outline we shall discover areas that

we have in common both at the spiritual and practical level with the Sikhs.

Who are Sikhs?

A Sikh is a person who believes in one God, the ten Gurus and their teaching and in the Guru Granth Sahib (the Sikh Holy Book). The Guru Granth Sahib is found in all Gurdwaras (Sikh Temples) and is treated with veneration as the Word of God, the living Guru.

The Sikhs are a spiritual people, and are open to interfaith dialogue very much in the spirit of Guru Nanak, the first Guru.

One God

The single most important piece of Sikh writing is Guru Nanak's understanding of God:

One God,
Truth is the name
The Creator without fear and without hate,
Omnipresent, pervades the universe,
Neither born, nor dies to be born again
Revealed through the grace of the Guru,
Before time itself there was Truth
When time began to run its course, there
was Truth,
Even now, there is Truth, and ever more
shall Truth prevail.

Ten Gurus

The first Guru and founder of Sikhism was Guru Nanak born in 1469 in Panjab, north-west India. At that time there were members of various religious groups living in Panjab, some of whom would come under the Hindu umbrella and some Muslim.

After a deep spiritual experience Nanak declared "There is no Hindu, there is no Muslim, so whose path shall I follow? I shall follow God's path, God is neither Hindu nor Muslim and the path which I shall follow is God's."

Guru Nanak was critical of some of the religious practices of his day and presented an alternative path which some have tried to see as an amalgam of the best of both religions. Others see him as setting an alternative path. His followers became known as Sikhs – ie learners, disciples. He appointed a successor and there were nine more Gurus after him. All the Gurus repre-

sented the same divine inner voice – the Divine Preceptor. Sikhs say that all the Gurus were one. The forms changed, the lights merged, but the Guru remained the same. The men were vessels for a single spiritual torch. By the time of the fifth Guru (1563-1606) the community had increased and it was Guru Arjan who built the temple at Amritsar, known as the Golden Temple. He also compiled the Guru Granth Sahib, the Holy Book of the Sikhs. It contains the teaching of the Gurus and that of Hindu and Muslim saints such as Kabir all in the poetic form of the time. Guru Arjan was martyred for the faith.



The Khalsa

By the time of the tenth Guru, Gobind Singh, 1675-1708, the Sikhs had suffered many persecutions and the tradition of the saint-soldier had developed. Guru Gobind Singh enhanced Sikh tradition when he created the Khalsa (usually translated as *pure ones*). This event is associated with Baisaki (the Spring Festival) of 1699. The forming of the Khalsa created the Singh identity and marked the beginning of a new community. Guru Gobind Singh's requirements of the Khalsa are clear.

"He who repeats night and day the name of God whose enduring light is unquenchable, he who bestows not a thought on any but the one God. He who has love and confidence in God and who places no confidence, even by mistake, in fasting, worshipping at tombs, places of cremation or at places where yogis meditate; he who recognises only the

one God and cares not for pilgrimages, alms, penances and austerities. He in whose heart the light of the perfect one shines, he is recognised as a pure member of the Khalsa."

A new initiation ceremony was created and the five items of Sikh identity were introduced, the five K's as they are known:—*kes*—uncut hair, (and hence the turban); *Kara*—bangle; *kangha*—comb; *kirpan*—dagger and *kachra*—underpants. Also all males were to take the name *Singh* (lion) and all women *Kaur* (princess). The turban and the beard became the sign of the orthodox Sikhs, but many carried on as Sikhs without all the symbols and still do today.

The Gurdwara and the Guru Granth Sahib

The Gurdwara or Temple is the Sikh place of worship. After the tenth Guru Sikhs believed that the Holy Book, known as The Guru Granth Sahib, was now the Guru. Hence it is the centre of Sikh worship. Thus the Guru Granth Sahib is the only object for veneration within the temple. Placed on a raised throne under a canopy it is treated with the utmost respect. As there is no priesthood in Sikhism any member of the congregation, man or woman, can read from the Guru Granth Sahib at services. On special occasions the Guru Granth Sahib is read continuously from start to finish. This takes around 48 hours and is done by families as a form of thanksgiving and at festivals. Sikhs are married in the presence of the Guru Granth Sahib. Children's names are chosen by opening the Guru Granth Sahib at random and the first letter on the page opened gives the initial of the child's

name. In times of indecision the Guru Granth Sahib may be consulted by thus opening it and the reading is taken as a command of God. Any of the poems in the Holy Book and other sayings and songs of the Gurus are sung. These two elements reading and singing form the main part of Sikh worship.

The Langar

All Sikh temples have kitchens and eating places attached where meals are served to any who come without discrimination. Thus the Gurdwara is a family centre as well as a place of worship and creates strong community bonds. The spirit of service, sharing and generosity is very strong in the community as a whole. Thus all the food and all the service associated with the Langar are freely given by the community. Here is a tremendous example of generosity, service and openness that is hard to equal. Christians visiting a Gurdwara always find this aspect of Sikhism a real inspiration.



Points for discussion

The Sikh spirit of service and work is very strong. What in the Christian tradition encourages us in these ways? What can we learn from Sikh practices in this respect?

How does the Sikh understanding of God help us to deepen our worship of God the Father, Son and Holy Spirit?

Suggested Reading

The Sikhs Today, Khushwant Singh (Orient Longmans 1985)

Thinking about Sikhism, W.O. Cole (Lutterworth 1980)

Sikhism by Beryl Dhanjal in Dictionaries of World Religions, B.T. Bashford 1987.

Understanding Your Sikh Neighbour, Piara Singh Sambhi (Lutterworth 1980)

Visiting a Sikh Temple by Davinder Kaur Babraa (Lutterworth 1981)

Sikhism and Christianity by W.G. Cole and P.S. Sambhi (Macmillan 1993).

This is part of the series of leaflets prepared for the Catholic community by the Committee for Other Faiths. Understanding and friendly relations with those who believe in God and live their lives with religious principles and purpose contribute to the harmony of society and the happiness of all. The series offers useful information to those who want to overcome the obstacle of ignorance and promote through dialogue, prayer and action the Catholic Church's teaching of respect and love for all peoples.

**+ Charles Henderson
Chairman**

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"Getting to Know People of Other Faiths" introduction to the series. "Our Neighbour's Faith and Ours - a Catholic introduction to living with neighbours of other Faiths", "What is Islam?", "What is Buddhism?", "Who was the Buddha?", "What is Hinduism?", "The Mosque - the Muslim House of Prayer", "What is the Baha'i Faith?", "Our Sikh Neighbours", "Is God at work outside the Church?", "Christian Prayer and Eastern Meditation", "What is Daoism?", "Prayer and Prayers in Islam", "What is Jainism?", "Hindu Festivals", "Aspects of Judaism", "What is Shinto?", "Who are the Zoroastrians?".

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