

# What is Sikhism?

## (part 1 of 2): Ten Gurus and a Book



Sikhism originated from the word Sikh, which in turn comes from the Sanskrit root *śiṣya* meaning *disciple* or *learner*. It is the world's fifth largest religion, with approximately 27 million adherents. The majority of Sikhs live in the Punjab region of India and Pakistan; however Sikhs live all over the world with more than 336,000 in the UK alone. Sikhism was founded in the 15th century by Guru Nanak and is based on his teachings, and those of the nine Sikh gurus who followed him.

Guru Nanak was born into a Hindu family at a time in history, not unlike our own when Hindu's and Muslims were in a state of extreme conflict. He felt compelled to form the Sikh religion stating, "'There is no Hindu, there is no Muslim, so whose path shall I follow? I shall follow the path of God.'" Guru Nanak and those who followed him rejected the Hindu caste system and went to great lengths to eradicate it from their thinking. Because the caste system was, at one time identifiable by surname, all male Sikhs use the name Singh, meaning lion, and the women the name Kaur, meaning princess.

Nine enlightened men followed Guru Nanak and together they became known as the ten gurus. The word *guru* is from the Sanskrit language and means, teacher, honoured person, religious person or saint. Sikhism adds a very specific definition to the word guru - the descent of divine guidance to humankind through the ten enlightened ones. The establishment of the Sikh religion began with Guru Nanak in 1469; the divine spirit was passed through each guru.

After the death of the tenth Guru, Gobind Singh in 1708, the Sikh Holy Scriptures were called Guru Granth Sahib. The Granth was compiled by the

fifth Sikh guru, Guru Arjan Dev ji. He undertook the enormous task of collecting, compiling, and scrutinizing the hymns and compositions of Guru Nanak and his predecessors. He decided to include not only the hymns of the Gurus but also that of other righteous men including both Muslims and Hindus. It is not clear whether the Guru Granth Sahib is considered to be revelation or inspiration from God however its teachings are practised in three ways: Chanting the Holy Name and thus remembering God at all times, making a living honestly, and sharing with others and helping those in need. Thus, with this in mind, a very simplified form<sup>[1]</sup> the teachings of Sikhism could be described as follows,

1. There is only one God. Worship and pray to the one God and to none other
2. Remember God, work hard and help others
3. God is pleased with honest work and true living
4. There is no rich, no poor, no black and no white, before God. Actions make you good or bad.
5. Men and Women are all equal before God
6. Love everyone and pray for the good of all
7. Be kind to people, animals and birds
8. Fear not, Frighten not.
9. Always speak the truth.
10. Be simple in your food, dress and habits.

Unlike most other religions, Sikhs wear the five articles of their faith. These are, known as the five Ks. **Kesh**, un cut hair kept very clean and considered to be God given. **Kangha**, a small wooden comb to keep the hair tidy and act as a reminder to keep well ordered lives. **Kirpan** is a short sword, about 15 cm long. It signifies honour, dignity, bravery and the Sikh duty to defend the weak and oppressed, and uphold truth. The Kirpan should never be drawn in anger, but once drawn it should not re-sheathed without shedding blood. The **Kara** is a steel bracelet worn on the right wrist (unless the wearer is left-handed). The circle of the bracelet is a symbol of God and unity, and the steel symbolises strength and fighting for right. **Kachs** are short underpants tied with a drawstring allowing ease of movement in battle. They also symbolise purity and modesty, and are a reminder of the necessity to remain faithful to their spouses.

The most widely recognised symbol of Sikhism is the turban worn by men. It symbolizes discipline, integrity, humility, and spirituality, and is a mandatory part of Sikh faith, not a social custom. The long uncut hair is covered by approximately 15 feet of cloth. Both men and women cover their heads in public as a sign of respect for the gurus and God.

Sikhs worship in a building known as a Gurdwara (*the door of the Guru*) and it is usually also a community centre consisting of two halls, one a prayer hall, and a room in which the Guru Granth Sahib is kept when not in use in the prayer hall. Sikhs have no particular day of devotion however there are usually daily services, often several times a day in the larger centres. A saffron and blue Nishan Sahib (flag) flies outside the gurdwara to indicate a place of hospitality. No one is allowed to bring tobacco, alcohol or intoxicating drugs inside. Worshippers leave their shoes outside and respectfully cover their heads when entering.

Inside the Gurdwara the Guru Granth Sahib is usually on display and worshippers bow to the ground before it and make offers of food and or money. Most often men and women usually sit separately but this is a cultural, not religious requirement. An important feature of the service is the distribution and sharing of Kara parshad, a mixture of semolina, sugar and ghee. This mixture is blessed near the end of a service by stirring with the small sword known as the kirpan. In the large gurdwaras, where services are offered throughout the day Kara parshad is distributed as worshippers either enter or leave the building.

In part two we will look at the Sikh concept of God and compare some of the Sikh beliefs with Islam.

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#### **Footnotes:**

[1]([http://www.ely.anglican.org/education/schools/collective\\_worship/documents/Background.pdf](http://www.ely.anglican.org/education/schools/collective_worship/documents/Background.pdf))

## **(part 2 of 2): An Indian or Monotheistic Religion?**

Sikhism is known as one of the Indian religions along with Hinduism and Buddhism, which we have discussed, and Jainism. These four religions share certain key concepts that are interpreted slightly differently by each group or sub group. They are all linked by a belief in karma, and the concept of reincarnation. In Hinduism the soul, in many different forms repeatedly returns until it reunites with the source. In Buddhism the concept is different and is referred to as rebirth, there is no unchanging or eternal soul; instead it is a series of separate lifetimes from conception to death.

Sikhism accepts the Hindu belief in karma and reincarnation but preaches a simple way of ending the cycle, by living a disciplined life. Sikhs believe that through the grace of God and by constantly contemplating upon and repeating His name one can be liberated from the cycle of birth and death. Guru Nanak explained to his followers that birth is due to Karma but liberation is due to God's grace. Guru Nanak taught that salvation does not mean entering paradise after a last judgment, but a union and absorption into God, sometimes referred to as the True Name.

Sikhism is essentially a monotheistic religion and for that reason it has more in common with Islam than either Hinduism or Buddhism, however, as we will discover, there are glaring differences in the concept of God and in the basic belief system.

Sikhs use many names to refer to God, including those from other faiths such as Rama or Allah. A commonly used name is Waheguru which means *wonderful Lord*. A Sikh also believes that God is shapeless, timeless, and sightless and that before creation, all that existed was God and His hukam (will or order). They use the numeral *1* to signify the universality of God.

Guru Nanak said that God is omnipresent and visible everywhere to the spiritually awakened. He stressed that God must be seen from heart of a human being; meaning devotees must meditate in order to progress towards enlightenment.

The concept of God as the Creator God, different and not part of the creation is similar to the concept of God in Islam.

**He created all, fills all, yet is separate. (Guru Granth Sahib)**

**“God created all things.” (Quran 39:62 )**

**The mind alone can never know Him. (Guru Granth Sahib)**

**“There is nothing like Him.” (Quran 42:11)**

However Sikhism states that God is in everything and everywhere, a concept rejected by Islam that sounds similar to the Hindu notion of God.

Sikhism though makes it very clear that they too deny the Hindu concept of God, and demi gods. Islam states categorically that God is not everywhere; rather He is above the heavens and close to His creation through His knowledge.

Islam is a religion revealed for all places, all people and all times. Muslims believe that the Quran is the last revealed book and that Prophet Muhammad is the final Prophet, God's final message to humankind was revealed to him. Therefore Islam rejects outrightly the notion that the Guru Granth Sahib is revelation from God. Sikhs wrote their own scripture based upon their interpretation of certain ideas taught in Hinduism and Islam. They also completely rejected some of the Islamic and Hindu teachings to come up with an interesting combination of both Hindu and Islamic theology.

There may be some similarities but it is the differences that expose the incompatibility of Islam and Sikhism. These include the fact that Sikhs are prohibited from eating ritually slaughtered meat (halal), Sikhs do not believe in pilgrimages whereas the pilgrimage to Mecca (Hajj) is a pillar of Islam, and Sikhs cremate their dead while Muslims are buried.

Sikhism denies the reality of angels and demons, both of which figure prominently in Islamic belief. There is no concept of divine reward and punishment such as Heaven and Hell, Sikhs believe, like Hindus and

Buddhists, that karma determines whether or not a person finally reaches unity with God, however, as already stated, they reject the Hindu belief in incarnations (avatars) of God, believing instead that there is only one God who makes His will known through the Gurus.

Guru Nanak was a religious reformer not the founder of an entirely new religion. “While Sikhism’s origins led the gurus to adopt some of the beliefs of Islam and Hinduism, they also led them to reject many of them. The goal was to show a path to enlightenment which was available to all, regardless of caste, sex, or other externals, and in so doing they set forth a religion which has some general similarities to Islam but is really quite distinctive. ”<sup>[1]</sup>

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### **Footnotes:**

<sup>[1]</sup> Ren Shengli and Gerhard Wohlberg.

(<http://www.karma2grace.org/webcomponents/faq/index.asp?det=68>)

Other Sources:

(<http://www.sikhismguide.org/sikh-belief.aspx>)

(<http://www.religioustolerance.org/sikhism2.htm>)

(<http://www.religionfacts.com/sikhism>)

(<http://www.sikhs.org>)

(<http://www.sikhnet.com/pages/introduction-sikhism>)