

Sikhism

History and Development

Unlike many of the others religions and sects of India, the Sikh's beginnings are fairly modern and well known. The religion dates itself from the birth of its founder Guru Nanak Dev Ji in 1469 A.D. in the Punjab territory of modern Pakistan. Raised as a ksatriya (warrior/ruler caste) Hindu, Nanak had a mystical experience with God that taught him "There is no Hindu, There is no Muslim". This expression points what is a markedly obvious synthesis between Islam and Hindu thought that is seen in Sikh thinking and theology. Nanak had experience the invasion of the Moguls (Muslims) and the slaughter of local Hindus marred his young life. His fascination with Islam seems to be tilted strongly toward the Sufi movement, which is the mystical element of the Islamic faith. The type of Hinduism that comes through his thinking is a Vaisnava (Vishnu) sect with some similar teachings found in the Sant Mat group. Contrary to Advaita Vedanta (non-dual) teaching which emphasizes the unreality (Maya) of the world and the sole reality of Brahman (God), the Vishnu sect emphasized a separation between Vishnu and the creation, but at the same time (and in a contradictory manner) believed that the creation would blend in and be one with Vishnu at the end of all things. Nanak retained the idea of Maya, but softened it so that it is not so much a statement about the false nature of reality, but rather that it is about the false nature of the attractions and ideals found in the world. He also retained the classic themes of reincarnation (the cycle of birth, death and rebirth) and karma (actions in previous lives affect the present). There is also an emphasis on bhakti (devotion) and mystical transformation through meditation,

which can come from tantric yoga and other forms. From Islam Nanak retained monotheism and Islam's abhorrence of idols. There had already been versions of monotheistic Hinduism so this was not quite a stretch for at least some Hindus. Like Islam Nanak attacked the Christian idea of the incarnation of the Christ, as well as the Avatar notion common in Hindu thought.

Some of the stories of Nanak's birth recount miraculous signs but none of this is recorded until much later after his death. He was known to dress as a Muslim one day, a Hindu bhakti the next, an ascetic the next day and so on. His movement gained much success from its denial and attack on the ancient oppressive caste system of Hindu India and from its elevation of the value of women. The Sikhs have three distinct symbols - The Nishan Sahib – that is a flag on each of the Temples. The second sign is the Ik Onkar – which is the first two words of the Granth Sahib and is translated “There is only one God”. The final and most important sign is the Khanda – which is a double-edged sword. The edges represent the separation of truth from falsehood. The Khanda is surrounded by the Chakar – which is a circle representing God's eternal perfection. The Chakar is surrounded by two Kirpans – swords that represent Spiritual and Temporal authority. Nanak and his followers built the first temple at Katarpur. Upon his death, he was succeeded by nine Gurus (teachers); in which usually the Guru would pass down the mantle of authority to a son. The fifth Guru Arjan compiled the authoritative text for the Sikhs, the Adi Granth/Granth Sahib, which was a pivotal moment for the growing religion. This time period also was known for Muslim attacks upon the Sikhs communities and the beginning of a new mindset. Under the next Guru Hargobind, the community

became more cohesive politically and especially militarily. The tenth Guru, Gobind Singh, made some changes that marked the movement profoundly. He founded the Khalsa (the pure) in 1699, which became known for its rigid system of interworking military, societal and religious concerns, which were now tied together in a single community. The Khalsa became the heart of the most devoted of the Sikhs and it becomes the center of Sikh existence. For many there is only the Khalsa and the non-believer. There seems to be no middle ground. For others the Khalsa were seen as the ultimate in devotion and religiosity, but there was still room for development and growth among the not so fervent. The Khalsa revolution also became the centerpiece for the Sikh nation, which carved out a large section of territory in the Punjab and had many successful military encounters with Muslims and Hindus. The British occupation of India and subsequent Sikh wars brought this period to an end, with the Sikhs later becoming quite prominent in the British army itself. The rise of Hindu nationalism (the Arya Samaj and Brahma Samaj) in the 19th century brought a combative emphasis to the distinction between traditional Hindus and all other supposed “non-Indian” religions, with attacks on the Sikhs, Christians, Buddhists, and Muslims becoming a normative problem to the present day. The second major move that Guru Gobind Singh made was with the death of his sons at Muslim hands, no clear successor was available. He made the decision to announce that there was no longer a need for an actual living successor, and that from now on the Sikh community would be taught by the word - the Granth Sahib. Often called the “11th” Guru, the emphasis of devotional reading, singing and meditation upon the scriptures replaced the authority of a living Guru.

Religious Authority

All authority among the Sikhs is found in the Granth Sahib, and the lesser-valued Dasam Granth. Most of these writings are hymns and other prose, with a few scattered stories. The hymns are considered instructive and serve as guides to doctrinal content for the Sikh community. The text includes even non-Sikh statements from Islamic and Hindu texts that Nanak thought illustrative of the central teaching that there is only one God for all people. There are several languages used in the Granth Sahib, which necessitates that educated men do the daily readings. There is no priesthood among the Sikh, primarily due to the egalitarian instinct of Guru Nanak, perhaps in reaction to the Brahmin priests of the despised caste system. A visible seat of authority is the five main temples or Gurdwaras. The Golden Temple at Amritsar is the seat of practice and devotion for the world community of Sikhs. Baptisms for the Khalsa, dedication and blessing for soldiers and decisions made by the Sants (temple teacher/missionary leaders) are discussed and approved or disapproved there. Each individual Sikh is encouraged to read and meditate daily, without the need for an interpretative authority. But this does not mean that there is some sort of post-modern flexibility – the community is self-defined within the boundaries of the ten Gurus and the Granth Sahib.

God/Gods

Guru Nanak stressed over and over the singularity of the divine. There is one God (waheguru), who is at once with attributes (Saguna) and without attributes (Nirguna). The Nam Simran (true name of God) is chanted silently. One might also meditate and chant silently any of the other names or attributes of God. God is formless, creator, ineffable, eternal and so on. All of these attributes are chanted silently because the divine is experienced in an interior manner through the believer. The mantra becomes a focus point, guided by the Guru's insights for a communion between God and the believer. As the believer meditates they are literally growing "into" God. This is where the inconsistent fusion between Hindu and Islamic thought can be dramatically seen. God is creator, implying a distinction between God and the world, as in Islamic thought. But God is also absorbing the creation into itself at the end of all things, as in Hindu thought. Sikhs seem to be unconcerned by the contradiction. God is never fully known by the believer as God is transcendent, but through the created order God's immanence can be known. Here the human heart can experience the divine through the meditation, and this meditation outweighs all else in spiritual discipline and life.

What is ultimate reality?

As seen in some of the other sections the Sikh mind seems to be divided on the nature of reality and this is a direct reflection of the oil/water synthesis between Hinduism and Islam. There is one God and as creator God as made a real world. But ultimately the concerns and thought patterns of the world are Maya or illusory. And all the creation will be absorbed back into the One God. So while it is monotheistic,

in some senses, it also seems to have Vedantic thinking driving it. So it strikes one that Nanak rejected the strict Vedantic understanding of Hindu thinker Shankara of reality as nothing more than Brahman (God) being hidden by the Maya machine (the human mind), while he accepted the later tradition of Ramanuja, who gave a temporary status to the world but an ultimate absorption into the divine source.

Who are human beings?

Humans are earthly creatures who are imbued with a spark of the divine source. Sikhs borrow from the Hindu text Bhagavad-Gita and use the illustration of the sparks (atman), which lays down its old and weary clothes (body) and picks up a new set of clothes (rebirth of reincarnation). Like Islam and Hinduism, Sikhs deny that human beings are fallen or inherently sinful creatures. The ultimate end for the human being is absorption (Samadhi) into God.

What is the problem with the world/people?

While on one hand Sikhs deny that their religion is the only true religion, at the same time they criticize the Hindu and Islamic rituals and practices that the Sikhs disagree with. This points to Guru Nanak's concern that too much emphasis in religion is placed on exterior behavior and ritual, with the attendant loss of emphasis on interior meditation and contemplation. Sikhs are also concerned with the "Five Thieves", which include lust, anger, greed, worldly attachment and pride, These are not properly understood by the weak and thus people are drawn by ignorance into them. This is similar to a form of Hindu avidya or ignorance. The

non-practitioner is driven by ego and as well fails to see the ultimate will of God. Similar to Inshallah of Islamic thought – God is ultimate and God’s will is done.

What is the solution to the problem with the world/people?

Simply put salvation is found in final absorption into the divine. Sikhs deny that there is either a Heaven or Hell. Instead the doctrine of reincarnation points to an eternal progression of sorts into the final absorption. This is mediated through sincere practice and obedience to the Guru’s, but as mentioned before this is most clearly brought about by proper communion with the divine through chanting and meditation of God and its names and attributes. Reflection on the divine within is superior to all exterior practice. Having said that however, there is a tremendous amount of exterior practice that is expected of the individual believer. The man or woman must be baptized into the Khalsa at the Amritsar Temple. Upon baptism the man is renamed Singh (Lion) and the woman is renamed Kaur (Princess). These names remain for life. They are indicative of the rejection of the caste, which often identified its distinct members through the last name. The Khalsa member is then to keep the five “K”s. These are:

Kesa – growing ones hair long. It must never, ever, be cut. Some of the teachings seem to treat this as the unforgivable sin. Men will wear the recognizable turban to keep their hair up.

Kangah – A comb that is used to keep the hair in place.

Kacha – short pants which serve as undergarments.

Kara – a metal bracelet.

Kirpan – a ceremonial dagger. This is seen as a ceremonial today especially in the Western world, but in its time and depending on the place the dagger was for self-defense.

Other practices are critical as well. The Sikh is expected to daily listen to, read, and meditate on the Granth Sahib. The Sikh can learn many other languages, but must learn Punjabi. The believer is not allowed to eat meat that has been slaughtered according to Muslim ritual (Halal). The Sikh must be first on the battle lines in a war and brave in all situations and never take alcohol or tobacco. So while the constant scriptural emphasis is on the inward devotion and meditative life, the flip side is that the Sikh is judged harshly upon their outward practices as well. This has become very critical as many Sikhs have migrated to the Western world and have accommodated themselves to Western practices. Some major disputes within the communities have arisen over such trivial things as having chairs and tables in the Gurdwaras for the common meals and young people cutting their hair, etc.

Witnessing Tips

It is key to remember that when witnessing to Sikhs, that one's life is constantly on display. Of course this is true of witnessing to all other people as well. One must also remember that the love of God for the Sikhs is astounding. Our love for them must at least approximate that. In many of their recent writings and in some meetings that I have attended, the 1984 assault by the Indian (Hindu army in the Sikh's minds) army on the Golden Temple in Amritsar is a defining moment for them. The assassination of Indian president Indira Gandhi and the riots, which

killed thousands of Sikhs following that, have left the Sikhs in a mindset that there is injustice and there must be a solution. But the Sikhs, even though they stress meditation and devotion for salvation, are really driven by their works. Their ability to follow the Khalsa commitment and their good works towards others are the measuring stick in this life and the basis for their next incarnation. Therefore, like in both Hindu and Islamic thought, the concept of divine grace as seen in the Cross of Christ is both repellent and attractive. The Sikhs want "grace" from God to deny the five thieves, but since the Sikh individually is but a piece of God then grace becomes a meaningless concept. If all is absorbed ultimately and there is no heaven and hell, then it follows directly that all our actions are ultimately meaningless. We suffer no ultimate punishment nor do we gain any ultimate rewards. All our behaviors still lead us to the same place – absorption into God.

But the Sikh, who lives here and now, knows that what the Hindus' did to the Golden Temple was evil. They bemoan the worldliness of the young people in the west and have a long history as a group of selfless behavior and bravery in many situations. This dichotomy of thought and behavior is a good place to introducing the concept of biblical grace and mercy. These of course cannot be earned. They are given by a truly loving God. This same all knowing God also takes our choices, both good and evil, and sees them as meaningful. That is why God is all holy and righteous. He knows what the Hindus did at Amritsar was evil and the assassination of the president of India was evil as well. For murder to be wrong – and every Sikh knows this is so – then murder must be a meaningful event. They know this in terms of karma for the next life, but somehow it loses its meaning when it comes to eternity.

But God is eternal and the Sikh knows this as well. That means that God is not going to denounce evil now and dismiss it later on. Many Sikhs have been moved by the idea, so critical to the Christian faith that Jesus Christ died for their sins. When the sins are identified as actions or karma, then the Sikh begins to understand that they do not have to pay the price and fear the next life – they can be forgiven. The Sikh religion also talks about the power of God, but doesn't really express it in any meaningful way. Here the resurrection of Jesus Christ can be shown to them as a powerful indicator of God's purpose and plan and especially His ability to bring change, hope, justice, and value to both the world and the individual.

Faithful Sikhs strive to devote themselves in meditation and chanting to grown into God. Just as any Sikh knows that worship of a false god is forbidden, they know that worship of the true God is commanded. It then follows that we cannot be seen as a part of God, even in the smallest sense, as God is eternally holy and we are not. So if this is the case then the Sikh must be shown that their worship of God in an important way is a worship of themselves. But the Sikh knows that his ego and pride are the epitome of the evils/thieves. This can open the door to fruitful discussion.

There are some who think that a comparison of waheguru and Jesus can be fruitful. I would maintain that there can be some comparison (monotheism, God as creator, etc) but there must also be contrast. God is eternally distinct from His creation and the problem is not ignorance but rather rebellion. The Sikhs in some way know this as well. They know that their own behavior separates them from God. This opens

the door to a discussion of sin and sin nature. Many questions can come from this. How can the Sikh be evil if the Sikh is a divine spark? How can God be holy if evil and good both come from God? If ignorance is the problem, as asserted by Hindus, Buddhists, Sikhs and others – then why do those who assert the position still practice what they know to be based in ignorance? It is here that the will of sinful human beings can be asserted as the only answer to the question. And if the will is sinful or fallen, then God alone can change it – the Sikh's teaching is double-minded on this point and the Christian can bring them to clarity.

In many ways the Sikhs are good models for generosity and tolerance. Non-Sikhs are welcome and fed at their temples around the world. This is something they value. The Christian witness can attend these types of events and show the love of God by bringing them to Christian services as well. Many Sikhs have been moved by the presentation of the Gospel they hear at a Christian service and have come to Christ. Like the man mentioned in the Gospels - the Sikh can be close to the heart of God on some issues. But these things can also bring confusion because of what they have been taught. Pray for your Sikh friends and neighbors and coworkers that the Holy Spirit will open their hearts and minds to the Gospel. Interestingly enough, many Sikhs (and Muslims) are describing how God came to them in a dream and told them to seek out a Christian pastor. So prayer for God to move in these people's lives is invaluable as well.

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