



Short Introductions to the World Religions - Sikhism

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1. The world population of Sikhs is around 15 million. In India they number about 14 million (two percent of the total population). Most of these live in the Punjab province, which is divided between India and Pakistan. One million Sikhs live outside India. About 200.000 are in Canada, and close to one-half of the Canadian Sikhs live

in British Columbia, where they make up about 80 percent of the Indo-Canadian population.

2. Sikhism is a religion founded by Guru Nanak (1469 - 1539). It rejected the caste system of Hinduism and stressed the equality of all men and women. "Sikh" means disciple, one who seeks the truth.

3. Sikhism was born in a region of India where Islam and Hinduism violently confronted each other. The message of Guru Nanak called for exclusive attention to the devotion to God and peace towards man. He said: "There is neither Hindu nor Muslim, so whose path shall I follow? I shall follow God's path. God is neither Hindu nor Muslim".

4. In the beginning Sikhism was a purely religious fellowship. However, in response to religious persecution it also became a militant, largely Punjabi, Indian freedom movement, when the tenth and last Guru created the order of the "Khalsa" in 1699. Most Sikhs in

Canada see themselves as a purely religious community that distances itself from any political extremism and from violence that may be committed in its name.

5. Some male Sikhs are more noticeable because they wear turbans and have beards. Most of these men belong to the Khalsa, a brother- and sisterhood of Sikhs who commit themselves by an initiation ceremony to a life of religious purity. Khalsa men receive the surname "Singh" (lion), women the surname "Kaur" (princess).

6. A Khalsa Sikh male wears five items of prescribed dress, often referred to as the five k"s:

(1) Kesh (unshorn hair and beard. The turban is required to cover the hair),
(2) Kangha (wooden comb to hold the hair together),
(3) Kara (steel bracelet worn on the right wrist),
(4) Kirpan (miniature sword),
(5) Kachh (knee length underwear).

The five k"s are important symbols of the Sikh faith.

They are important to all Sikhs, not only to those who wear them. Many Sikhs do not belong to the Khalsa, but are equally as committed to their religion.

7. Sikhism has very few doctrines. Its principal message can be summarized as:

- (1) follow sincerely the essentials of your religious tradition and not meaningless rituals;
- (2) lead an honest and truthful life in thought, words and actions;
- (3) meditate on the One and Formless God;
- (4) serve God by serving his creation while leading a normal family life;
- (5) share with the needy whatever you can spare;
- (6) treat all people as equals.

8. The Holy Scripture of Sikhism is the "Guru Granth Sahib", also called the "Adi Granth". It contains the hymns of the Sikh Gurus along with hymns of medieval Hindu and Muslim saints. The Adi Granth is being read frequently during the worship of the community and at other times. After the death of

the tenth Guru
(1708) the Scripture
became the only
Guru of Sikhism and
its highest authority.

9. The Guru Granth
Sahib is kept under
a canopy in the
house of worship,
called the
"Gurdwara". People
entering the
Gurdwara remove
their shoes and
show reverence to
the scripture by
covering their heads
and by touching the
ground with their
foreheads before
sitting down in the
congregation.

10. Non-Sikhs are
invited to participate
in worship services
(usually on Sunday
mornings), which
consist of the
reading and singing
of the hymns from
the scripture. The
worship service is
followed by a free
community meal in
another part of the
Gurdwara, the
"Langar" (common
kitchen).

11. The spiritual
leadership of
Sikhism is invested
in five elected
heads of five major
Gurdwaras in India.
After more than two
hundred years of
non-uniformity
within Sikhism these
leaders consulted
with Sikh scholars
and theologians in

the first half of this century and defined belief and practice of Sikhism in a code of conduct for individual and corporate life.

12. Sikhism is opposed to exclusive claims of any religion, including Sikhism itself: "For anyone who is determined to practice truth there is only one religion" (AG 360).

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[Back to content](#)
[World Religions](#)