



## 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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