



*A Sikh family walks past the Golden Temple at Amritsar, India.*

## CHAPTER 5

# SIKHISM

*Sikhism is an impressive religious tradition with which Latter-day Saints can find a sense of kinship. There is a strong sense that human beings are related to God and that he loves us.*

Sikhism differs from Hinduism, Jainism, and Buddhism in that it believes in only one God. At the same time, the religion retains the concepts of karma, reincarnation, and release from the rounds of rebirth. Sikhism has a more positive attitude toward the world than the other faiths but, like them, is not a missionary faith, since it sees all other religions as leading to the same place that Sikhism does—namely, to God. Sikhs live predominantly in the Punjab region of India (i.e., in the northwest of India). Their primary vocation is farming, but because of certain tenets of their faith, they are often found in military or police positions all over the British Commonwealth. There are about twenty-three million Sikhs in the world today, with the majority living in India.<sup>1</sup>

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### — ORIGINS —

#### FOUNDER

The founder of Sikhism was Guru Nanak, who was born in 1469 CE in the village of Talwandi, which is in present-day Pakistan about

thirty miles outside Lahore. Nanak died in 1538 CE. His father was an accountant and farmer from a mercantile caste. The village in which Nanak lived was governed by a man named Rai Bular, who had converted from Hinduism to Islam and had an interest in seeing the two faiths live peacefully together. Sikhism is often explained as an effort to reconcile Hinduism and Islam, but Sikhism connects strongly to Hinduism through the devotional and inner paths to God. In addition, Sikhism retains much of the fundamental philosophy of Hinduism. In other words, the presence of Islam is unnecessary to explain the doctrines of Sikhism, and Nanak was not trying to amalgamate the two faiths. Rather, he was attempting to be true to the mission he received when he was taken into the presence of God and commissioned.

Nanak was an interesting child. He preferred sitting in meditation to playing with the other children. He went to school for one day, came home saying that they had nothing they could teach him, and refused to return. In harmony with traditional Hindu practice, Nanak's father arranged a marriage for him. It seems to have been a happy one, and he had two sons. In his late teens, Nanak gained a post in the district capitol and did very well. His deepest love, however, was reserved for God. Each evening Nanak would praise God and pray. Gradually a group of seekers began to gather around him. Each morning Nanak would bathe in the river before sunrise, and on one of these mornings, he disappeared into the river. His companions believed he had drowned, but according to his account, he was taken into the presence of God and commissioned. A probable account of the experience, since he was a poet and musician, appears in poetic form and is as follows:

I was a minstrel out of work; The Lord gave me employment.  
The Mighty One instructed me: "Night and day, sing my praise!"  
The Lord did summon this minstrel to his High Court;  
On me He bestowed the robe of honor of those who exalt Him.  
On me He bestowed the Nectar in a Cup, the Nectar of His true and  
Holy Name.<sup>2</sup>

In other words, God commissioned Nanak to make known the one God, much as he did Abraham. After three days, Nanak reappeared but sat in silence for twenty-four hours, and then the first

words he said were, “There is neither Hindu nor Muslim.” What he meant—and this idea underlies all Sikh thought about other faith traditions—is that there is one God. This one God makes himself known in many ways, in many places, and under many names. Thus, all those who worship God, no matter what they may choose to call him, are all worshipping the same deity. The Sikhs call this God “True Name” or Vahiguru (which means “the wonderful sovereign”), since no name is adequate for God. Others may call him Shiva or Vishnu or Allah, yet all are worshipping the one God. Therefore, there are neither Hindus nor Muslims, nor, for that matter, Jews, Christians, Buddhists, or others, for all human beings who worship God are brothers and sisters before God. There is no reason for interfaith tensions. Hence, Sikhism is not a missionary faith but one that sees all faiths as leading to the same place (i.e., to the presence of God) when followed well.

Upon returning from his visionary experience, Nanak began what were to be several trips to spread his message. To *visually* communicate his message, Nanak dressed partly as a Hindu and partly as a Muslim.<sup>3</sup> Nanak would sing his message to the accompaniment of a stringed instrument played by his Muslim companion, Mardana, who never became a Sikh, thus exemplifying further the inclusiveness of his message. His first trip took him through central India. A second trip carried him as far south as Sri Lanka. The third trip took him to Tibet and the fourth to Mecca and Medina in Arabia, as well as to Baghdad in present-day Iraq.

There is a story associated with his visit to Mecca that further underlines the inclusive nature of his theology. According to tradition, when he was lying down for the night in a mosque, his feet were pointed toward the niche in the wall that indicates to the worshiper the direction of the central shrine of Muslim religious piety. A Muslim, seeing what he discerned to be disrespect, kicked Nanak’s legs and told him to point his feet away from God. In return, Nanak asked him to point his feet where God was not, indicating that God is not limited by shrines and sacred places.

Despite all the travel, Nanak’s principal success came at home in the Punjab region of India. There, groups of Sikhs (disciples) began to gather around him. As he neared the end of his life, Nanak appointed his successor, so that there would be no doubt about who should succeed him.

The man appointed was Lehna, a close associate who became known as Guru Angad. Interestingly, Nanak did not appoint either of his sons, whom he considered to be unworthy of the position, although they protested the decision and caused some trouble following Nanak's death.

The story surrounding Guru Nanak's death supports the basic idea that nothing should cause religious division. According to tradition, as Nanak approached death, his Hindu followers wanted to cremate his body as was their custom. His Muslim followers, however, according to their tradition, wanted to bury his body. Nanak told both groups to bring fresh flowers and place them on either side of him. Whichever group's flowers were in bloom in the morning could have his body. He then pulled the sheet over his head and became quiet. In the morning, both sets of flowers were in bloom and Nanak's body had vanished. Thus, even with his death, unity was maintained.

#### *SCRIPTURES*

According to Gurinder Singh Mann,<sup>4</sup> the Sikh scriptures (the Guru Granth Sahib) were compiled over an extended period of time, with portions being contributed by six of the ten human Gurus. The first part of the scriptures comes from Guru Nanak, and this was followed by writings of the next four Gurus. Guru Arjan is usually credited with compiling the Granth, but each Guru contributed to the growing collection during his Guruship. The last Guru to add his writings was the ninth one, Tegh Bahadur. Following the section of the scriptures composed by the above six Gurus, there is a section containing the works of various Sikh religious poets. The scriptures end with a section from a number of non-Sikh religious persons of both the Hindu and Muslim faiths, demonstrating clearly the religious inclusiveness of Sikhism. The tenth Guru, Guru Gobind Singh, declared the book to be his successor, and thus the Guru Granth Sahib is given the place of honor in all Sikh places of worship.

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#### — BASIC DOCTRINES —

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##### *GOD*

The center of Nanak's teachings was the one God, known sometimes as "True Name" or more regularly as Vahiguru.<sup>5</sup> As suggested earlier, God is beyond names, so the best that can be done is simply



*Granthi reading the scriptures. The scriptures of Sikhism are known as the Guru Granth Sahib, the living Guru of Sikhism.*

to call him by a word that expresses an attribute or quality of God. To place anything in the place of God, be it persons, material wealth, a job, or something else, is to live a life of illusion, since the only true life is that which has God at its center. What the Sikhs call illusion would probably be called idolatry by many others.

Mann notes that God is also beyond form.<sup>6</sup> He is transcendent, yet he is involved in the world. He expresses his justice by destroying evil and supporting good, often through earthly rulers. This reflects the “Father” side of God, while the side of mercy and forgiveness reflects the maternal side of deity. God is loving and extends his grace to humankind, but persons need to be prepared to receive that grace.<sup>7</sup> Grace is not imposed on them without their cooperation.

Of all the religions we have examined thus far, Latter-day Saints will likely feel the most comfortable with Sikhism because of its belief in one God. The multiple gods of Hinduism or the lack of a supreme deity in Jainism and Buddhism may feel uncomfortable to a Latter-day Saint, but in Sikhism there is the belief in one supreme deity with human beings bearing a spark of his divinity. Humans seek a profound union with this God. There is, however, an openness in Sikhism to other faiths that may be a bit unfamiliar to Latter-day Saints. Sikhism does not see itself as the only valid religion, as we have already seen.

The openness of Asian religions to traditions other than their own makes Latter-day Saint missionaries shake their heads. They will find a person, teach the restored gospel, and get affirmations that the person believes that Joseph is a prophet, that the Book of Mormon is true, and that the current President of the LDS Church is a true and living prophet; but when the missionaries press the person to accept baptism, the reaction is often something like, “Convert? How narrow can you be? I will just add what you have taught me to what I already know to be true.”

### CREATION

Unlike in Hinduism, in Sikhism there is a clear beginning to the created order and to human beings. Mann records a creation hymn from the Guru Granth Sahib which sounds very much like Christian, Jewish, and Islamic theologies of creation:

For endless eons, there was only darkness.  
Nothing except the hukam existed.  
No day or night, no moon or sun;  
Vahiguru alone sat in a primal stance. . . .  
When Vahiguru so willed, creation came into being. . . .  
Without any support Vahiguru erected the universe. . . .  
The Unmanifested One revealed itself in the creation.<sup>8</sup>

This would appear to approach the doctrine of “creation from nothing.” The *hukam* is the divine will, or the divine command. Human beings were created simultaneously with the world, and Vahiguru is

very much involved in the daily management of the world and its inhabitants. He is anything but a distant God.

### *HUMAN BEINGS*

Human beings are central to God's creation. According to Mann, their "goal is to attain liberation, which is to be one with Vahiguru by having a respectful place in the divine court."<sup>9</sup> Other Sikhs see a direct connection between God and the human being in that the human contains a spark of the divine, and the goal is for that spark to return to its origin in God, much like a spark returning to the bonfire. In this view there may be a loss of individuality envisioned. Humanity's primary purpose is to rid itself of ego so that people can recognize their place in the divine creation and in relationship to deity.

Human beings are to recognize two fundamental poles to life—their relationships with God and those with one another. Sikhism is first concerned with the relationship between the human being and God, and then it is concerned with the relationship between humans. There is no solitary dimension to Sikhism. Salvation involves not merely individuals but also families, communities, and ultimately the world community.<sup>10</sup> This principle sounds familiar to Latter-day Saints, who believe that families may be eternal and that husband and wife are bound together for eternity if sealed through the authority of the priesthood.

Sikhs consider human beings to be princes and princesses of a heavenly ruler but separated from God by their egos. Thus, humankind should develop their godly aspects and realize the image of God (defined as his attributes) in which they have been created and recapture their true selves. In the end, religion should transform people, and all religions bring their adherents to the same place. But humans are not to deny the material world. The spiritual and the material are not necessarily antithetical to one another. Therefore, there is not an officially recognized ascetic order among Sikhs. The material world is to be used wisely by spiritually enlightened persons.

Similarly, from the Jewish, Christian, or Islamic perspective, everything that God has made is good. "And God saw every thing that he had made, and, behold, it was very good" (Genesis 1:31). As one person put it, "God don't make no junk!" While the grammar is a bit



suspect, the sentiment is true. For the Sikh it is also true. As with the other monotheistic faiths, this world is to be used and enjoyed within the bounds of good stewardship. We are not to waste it or destroy it, but to be stewards of all that God has given us. Thus, the married state, for example, with its physical pleasures, as well as the other things of the world, is given to us by God. We should not, however, make the material things our goal. We are to use the world's materials for the betterment of humankind in general. Sikhs, like Latter-day Saints, are to live in the midst of the things of the world without letting those things capture them.

#### *GETTING NEARER TO GOD*

The community of Sikhs is guided by three golden rules. The first rule is that persons should remember God through meditation, but this is not the type of meditation that we find in Zen. There persons empty their minds and simply focus on the breath. Here meditation may be on God or the scriptures, so there is content to the meditation, much as among Latter-day Saints. Secondly, Sikhs are to earn their livelihood honestly. A guidebook of India that the author once used suggested that if persons needed automobile or motorcycle repairs, they should look for a "Mr. Singh," a name taken by male Sikhs at the time of baptism. What this guidebook meant was that persons needing assistance should find a Sikh because he or she would treat the customer honestly, which is not to say that persons of other faiths would not do the same. Rather, this statement is an interesting affirmation of the integrity of Sikhs as a whole from the guidebook's perspective. Finally, Sikhs are to share with the needy. If a person is lost, hungry, and in need of shelter, he or she can go to a Sikh place of worship and find food and a place to sleep.

Overlapping the golden rules are the three ways to get closer to God. First is service to people, and Sikhs seek various opportunities to serve. As noted above, a communal meal is available at the Sikh worship centers, and anyone is welcome. A wonderful example of this desire to serve occurred at the World Parliament of Religions held in Barcelona, Spain, in the summer of 2004. The Sikhs from all over Europe, and particularly from England, gathered with the primary motive of serving the four thousand people who attended the conference. The Sikhs erected a tent

which served as a worship center, and there they served a free community meal each day to any of the participants who wanted to eat. People would sit on the floor in long lines and be served. No one sat higher than anyone else because all are equal. In addition, as the author came out of one lunch, he noticed an anonymous act of service—an elderly Sikh cleaning the shoes that had been left outside the tent.

Meditation, addressed above, is the second way to get closer to God. The third way is to belong to a community of believers who need each other to draw and stretch them to a deeper faith commitment. As already noted, a Sikh is not a person of faith in isolation from the human family.

### *KARMA AND REINCARNATION*

Karma and reincarnation are a part of Sikh thought. Sikh karma is like that of Hinduism (i.e., the cosmic karma that has no form or materiality). While considered part of the theological conversation, karma is transcended by the omnipotence of God. God can forgive all that is past, and thus karma among Sikhs is more like sin among Christians. It is something that through his mercy God can overcome. Reincarnation is a reminder that people can be less than God created humans to be, but it does not have the grinding effect on human life that it might in other religious traditions.

### *RITUAL AND RELIGION*

Nanak denounced ritual. Ritual did not bring one into union with God and was therefore unnecessary. One finds in the Guru Granth Sahib the following statement from God to Nanak:

Religion consisteth not in a patched coat, or in a Yogin's staff, or in ashes smeared over the body; Religion consisteth not in earrings worn, or a shaven head, or in the blowing of horns. . . . Religion consisteth not in wanderings to tombs or places of cremation, or sitting in attitudes of contemplation. Religion consisteth not in wandering in foreign countries, or in bathing at places of pilgrimage.<sup>11</sup>

If ritual is not religion, then what is? Once more, the answer is given in the Guru Granth Sahib:

Let compassion be thy mosque, Let faith be thy prayer mat, Let honest living be thy Koran, Let modesty be the rules of observance, Let piety be the fasts thou keepest; In such wise strive to be a Muslim; Right conduct the Ka'aba; Truth the Prophet; Good deeds thy prayer; Submission to the Lord's Will thy rosary; Nanak, if this thou do, the Lord will be thy Protector.<sup>12</sup>

It is clear that, to the Sikhs, real religion concerns inner attitude and spirituality. Religion is, therefore, compassion, faith, honest living, modesty, piety, right conduct, good deeds, and submission to the Lord's will. Any religious person would be hard-pressed to find a better list of what it means to be religious. Anybody can put on the outward trappings of religion, but only truly religious people embody religion at the level of attributes. The Sikh is challenged by God through Guru Nanak to make these attributes a part of his or her daily life.

### SIKHS IN THE WORLD

Because God is good, there should be no despair before the world. The world and its people, which he created, are good. Thus, Sikhs are to have fellowship with persons of all castes and levels of society. They are to seek knowledge, love their spouses, and not violate their marriage bonds. They are not to be argumentative or arrogant. They are to avoid



*The Golden Temple at Amritsar built by Guru Arjan Dev. Courtesy of Oleg Yunakov.*

persons that would lead them into evil ways. In the end, Sikhs are to be conciliatory and peaceful, and if persons attack them three times, God will fight for them the fourth time. Through the first five Gurus, the Sikhs were pacifists living out Nanak's vision for them. However, things changed in the transition from the fifth to the sixth Guru.

— POLITICAL HISTORY AND THE GURUS —

Much of Sikh life and thought arise out of their political history and the succession of ten Gurus, who shaped Sikh life. This section will examine some of the successors to Guru Nanak. As noted above, with the fifth Guru, a change occurred in Sikhs' attitudes toward violence.

*THE THIRD GURU: GURU AMAR DAS*

Amar Das came from a Hindu family which worshiped Vishnu. He was born in 1479 and died in 1574, becoming Guru in 1552. Once he was Guru, he established the communal kitchen with its communal meal. Anyone seeking to have an audience with Guru Amar Das had to sit on the floor with the community and eat the meal. This even held true when the Emperor Akbar wanted to see Guru Amar Das. Perhaps the measure of Akbar's greatness is that he sat on the floor with everybody else and participated in the communal meal, after which the Guru visited with him.

Guru Amar Das lived in a day and time when women could not remarry when their husbands died. Their lot in life after the death of their husbands was often extremely hard, and Amar Das disapproved of them remaining unmarried, which was a significant departure from Hindu practice. Amar Das added to the collection of writings begun by Nanak and also collected writings from Hindu holy men. He had all of the writings translated into Punjabi, the language of the average Sikh, again breaking with traditional Hinduism, in which the sacred language was Sanskrit.

*THE FIFTH GURU: GURU ARJAN DEV*

Guru Arjan Dev was born in 1563 and was the youngest son of Guru Ramdas, the fourth Guru. He was appointed Guru in 1581 and died in 1606. He is known for two principal accomplishments. First, he built the Golden Temple at Amritsar. His predecessor had already

dug the lake in which the temple sat, and this glorious building is especially sacred to Sikhs today.

Secondly, Guru Arjan compiled the *Adi Granth*, or “first book,” which ultimately became the Sikh scriptures. This compilation was the product of an elder brother’s jealousy and duplicity. His brother, Prithi Chand, was composing his own hymns and passing them off as the compositions of Guru Nanak. Guru Arjan Dev realized that he needed to preserve the authentic stream from the Gurus, so he continued the collection of the Gurus’ hymns begun by his predecessors. To their work he added his own, and he also collected the hymns of Hindu and Muslim holy men whose works reflected the glory of God. His collection, which first appeared in 1604, was called the *Adi Granth*, and with the addition of Guru Tegh Bahadur’s writings, it is today known as the *Guru Granth Sahib*. True to Sikh egalitarianism, anyone could read the book, regardless of sex or caste or faith. Guru Arjan sent a copy of it to the Muslim Emperor Akbar, who thought it was well done. However, in 1605, Akbar died and was succeeded by Jehangir. Unfortunately, the new emperor was morally lax and sought to please the Muslim clerics. They did not approve of the *Adi Granth* and wanted parts of it changed, something which Arjan Dev refused to do. Thus, to please the clerics, Jehangir demanded that Arjan present himself to the court.

Before going, Guru Arjan Dev named his son, Hargobind, the next Guru. He then presented himself before the emperor, who turned him over to a man named Murtaza Khan, who tortured him for refusing to modify the *Adi Granth*. Guru Arjan was forced to sit on a red hot sheet of iron, had burning sand poured over his body, and was immersed in boiling water. Finally, on May 30, 1606, Arjan asked for permission to bathe in the river. Repeating the words, “Sweet is your will, O God; the gift of your Name alone I seek,” he walked into the river and was swept to his death.<sup>13</sup>

#### *THE SIXTH GURU: GURU HARGOBIND*

Guru Hargobind was born in 1595, became Guru on May 25, 1606, and died in 1644. Because of the way his father died, Hargobind moved in a more militant direction with the purpose of protecting the faith. He wore two swords, one of secular power called *Miri*, and the other of devotion which was called *Piri*. It was Hargobind

who transformed the Sikhs from a pacifist community to one of saint-soldiers. He wore the royal robes of a king and encouraged the Sikhs to be involved in physical training, horsemanship, and training in arms. Interestingly, even though he had numerous battles with the Muslims, because of his charm and holiness, he became friends with the emperor Jehangir, who had sent Hargobind's father to his death. Hargobind even saved the emperor's life when he was threatened by a tiger.

### *THE EIGHTH GURU: GURU HAR KISHEN*

Guru Har Kishen was born in 1656, was appointed Guru in 1661, and died in 1664. His appointment at such a young age offers an opportunity to consider the meaning of Guruship. When God, or the Divine Light, rests upon a Guru, all the knowledge and wisdom that are necessary to fill his role are embodied in him, regardless of age. Har Kishen had great spiritual power, and "the answer to the spiritual power of the young Guru lies in the understanding that the Guru, though human in body, is Divine in Spirit."<sup>14</sup>

When the emperor Aurengzeb succeeded Jehangir, he wanted Har Kishen to come to the court for the purpose of destroying Sikhism and converting all Hindus and others to Islam. Because his father had forbidden him to see the emperor, Har Kishen refused but later was enticed to go to Delhi by other Sikhs. In Delhi, cholera and small-pox were everywhere, and the Guru contracted them, understanding the diseases to be God's will for him. A Sikh explanation states, "The Guru out of human compassion took the small-pox to himself and absolved the inhabitants of Delhi of it. Raja Jai Singh got a tank [a manmade lake] excavated. The Guru dipped his feet in the water of the tank and after that whosoever took bath with that water, was cured from small-pox."<sup>15</sup>

Har Kishen died at age eight from the diseases, but his last words according to one tradition were "Baba Bakala," meaning that the next Guru would be found in the town of Bakala, but no one knew who it was.

### *THE NINTH GURU: GURU TEGH BAHADUR*

According to the above tradition, Sikhs went to Bakala but found several persons claiming the right to be Guru. Meanwhile, there was

a merchant who had ships at sea, and he promised God that if they arrived safely, he would give five hundred gold pieces to the Guru. When they reached port, he went immediately to Bakala to pay his debt, but he found no identified Guru. He decided to test claimants and give each two gold pieces, believing that the real Guru would ask for the rest. After giving each of the pretenders two gold coins and having none of them ask for the remainder, he asked if there were no other holy men in Bakala. He was told that Tegh Bahadur, the youngest son of Guru Hargobind, lived there. When he presented Tegh Bahadur with the two coins, Bahadur asked where the remainder of the coins were. The merchant ran outside shouting that he had found the Guru.

Tegh Bahadur was born in 1621 and was appointed Guru in 1664. He died in 1675. He was primarily interested in the meditative life, but once he became the Guru, he traveled and established community kitchens, had wells dug, and promoted honest work and charity for the poor.

In 1675, Hindus came to Guru Tegh Bahadur asking him to intercede on their behalf with the Emperor Aurengzeb, who was persecuting the Hindus and demanding that they become Muslims or lose their lives. Seeing that something was troubling Tegh Bahadur, Gobind Rai, his nine-year-old son, asked his father what was wrong. Teg Bahadur explained to him the plight of the Hindus and told him that unless a holy man were willing lay down his life for the Hindus, they would be slaughtered. Gobind Rai asked who was better suited for that than his father. Tegh Bahadur simply stated that he was concerned that his son was too young to take over the Guruship. Gobind Rai told him to leave that to God and to protect the Hindus.

Tegh Bahadur then told the Hindus to inform the emperor that if he could convert Tegh Bahadur, they would all convert. He then appointed his son to succeed him and left to see the emperor. When Tegh Bahadur arrived at court, he castigated the emperor for his narrowness, his bigotry, and his intolerance. In response, Aurengzeb had him arrested, tortured, and finally beheaded on November 11, 1675. All day the body lay in the street because no Sikh had the courage to show himself. Finally, after dark, Sikhs collected the body and placed

it in a nearby house which they burned down, thereby cremating the corpse. The head was retrieved during a rain storm and Gobind Rai cremated it. In doing so, however, he swore that Sikhs would never be able to hide again.

### *THE TENTH GURU: GURU GOBIND SINGH*

Under Guru Gobind Rai, the Sikhs consolidated their strength. When he was thirty-three, the Guru went to a spring festival known as Baisakhi, set up his tent, and remained out of sight until people had gathered. Suddenly, the Guru came out of his tent with his sword in his hand and asked for a Sikh willing to give his head for the faith. Finally, a man came forward and was taken into the tent, where a thud was heard, and then the Guru reappeared with a bloody sword in his hand. He asked for a second person who went into the tent, a thud was heard, and Gobind Rai returned with a bloody sword. He did this five times, and the people were becoming horrified. At last, the Guru threw back the door of the tent, and there were the five, dressed in royal robes. Some Sikhs hold that the Guru actually decapitated the five and by his divine power made them whole, holding that the Guru had the power to raise the dead. Other authors state that there were five decapitated goats lying in the back of the tent. Regardless of which account is accurate, all five men went into the tent believing they were going to die. These five became known as the “Five Beloved” and became the foundation of the Khalsa (The Pure Ones), which the Guru proceeded to establish.

At that time, the Khalsa was the community of baptized Sikhs. To create the Khalsa, Guru Gobind Rai took a large steel kettle, poured water into it, and stirred it with a double-edged sword. While some stories are amplified, tradition says that he then took a sparrow and gave it two drops of the water. The sparrow immediately defeated the Guru’s hawk. Seeing this, the Guru’s wife poured some sugar into the water, saying that with strength there should also be sweetness. This sweetened water, known as amrit, was put in a basin from which the Guru had all five of the men drink, and then he sprinkled amrit in the eyes and hair of the five. All the men were from different castes, so drinking from a common vessel, in the Hindu context, totally destroyed any caste distinctions. Then Gobind Rai asked them



to initiate him, for he was no better than they. As part of the initiatory ritual, he had each of the men and himself add the name Singh (meaning “lion”) to their names, and thus Guru Gobind Rai became Guru Gobind Singh, or Gobind the Lion. Women add the name Kaur (meaning “princess”) to their names.

We should now remember that the Guru had promised upon the death of his father that no Sikh would be able to hide in the future. Thus, in addition to the initiation ceremony, Gobind Singh gave himself and the initiates the five marks of the Khalsa, known as the “five Ks.” All Sikhs were to wear these as a sign of their initiation into the Khalsa and their commitment to its principles. The Ks are as follows, and both men and women wear them.

*Kesh.* The kesh is long uncut hair and beard. Neither men nor women cut their hair, nor men their beards. Sometimes it appears that a man has trimmed his beard, but if one looks closely, one can see that he has probably separated it and tied it on top of his head. Women do not shave body hair, and many women will have extremely long, loose hair. To some, the kesh signifies spirituality and living out God’s purposes and will naturally.

*Kangha.* The kangha is a small comb that holds the hair in place. It is particularly important for men, whose very long hair needs to be wrapped up before a turban can be put on. Women often wear the kangha as a decorative item in their hair. The kangha is said by some to symbolize mental discipline.

*Kacch.* The kacch is a pair of short underdrawers which symbolize sexual purity.

*Kara.* The kara is a steel bracelet which symbolizes control of a person’s actions and the remembrance of God. It is usually worn on the right hand if right-handed, or on the left if left-handed.

*Kirpan.* The kirpan is a short dagger or “sword” and is a religious symbol which represents a Sikh’s willingness to stand against injustice and oppression committed against anyone. Sikhs have died in defense not only of their own faith but also of Hindus, as did Tegh Bahadur, as well as of Muslims.

In addition to the five Ks, Khalsa members commit themselves to certain practices in life. They are to worship only one God, to honor the Guru Granth Sahib, and to honor the Gurus. They are to deny



*Sikh men with the five Ks, including uncut hair and the short daggers.*

caste and other ritual practices, both Hindu and Muslim, and any person is welcome. They are to wash, pray, and chant the scriptures at the beginning of each day. They may not use drugs or alcohol, nor may they smoke, steal, or gamble; and they may not make holes in their noses or ears. Finally, Sikhs are expected to contribute one-tenth of their income to charity. Some of this will go to the worship center, but some may also be contributed to hospitals, schools, or other enterprises to support the less fortunate. Thus, these are highly principled saint-soldiers.

As can be seen, Latter-day Saints and Sikhs hold comparable values. Neither believes in the use of alcohol or drugs. Both value chastity, and sexual relations are to be had only within the bonds of marriage. Both value truth. Both give 10 percent of their income to charitable causes. Both try to apply their faith to daily life.

Sikhs are conscious, however, that different Sikhs live by a variety of standards. Thus, Amritdhari (nectar-bearing) Sikhs are those who have been baptized. Keshdhari (hair bearing) Sikhs are those who maintain the long hair but have not yet been baptized. A third group has arisen who follow Nanak's precepts and disciplines but who have shaved their hair and beards. Most of these individuals live outside India and have adapted themselves to new cultures. According to Mann, an acceptable term for them has not been found.<sup>16</sup>

Gobind Singh swore that no Sikh would be able to hide after the death of his father, Tegh Bahadur, because no Sikh had the courage to reveal himself and collect Tegh Bahadur's body after he was beheaded. The author remembers standing outside a Gurdwara in Old Delhi talking to a couple of Sikh gentlemen and having one of them say, "I can't tell whether you are English, American, German, or Dutch, but you look at me, and you know who I am." The five Ks clearly mark Sikhs, and endowed Latter-day Saints are also marked. They wear a temple garment which identifies them. It is not visible to the world the way the five Ks are, but it bears markings that remind Latter-day Saints of covenants they have made, thereby reminding them whose they are. They are children of God who have made agreements with their Heavenly Father to live a life different from that of the surrounding world. So also does an Amritdhari Sikh live similar commitments, although for him or her, the signs of those commitments are external rather than hidden. But the signs are equally real to the faithful Sikh or Latter-day Saint.

The tenth Guru, Gobind Singh, died as the result of an attempted assassination in which he was wounded. The Muslim Shah of his area sent his doctors to attend the wound, which they were able to sew up, and the prospects looked good for a full recovery. However, after a time, feeling that he was healed, the Guru decided to see how far he could throw a spear. The effort tore the wound open, and a week later he was dead. Before his death, he declared that there would be no more human Gurus, and the eleventh Guru would be the sacred scriptures. Thus, these texts are known today as the Guru Granth Sahib.

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— WORSHIP AND RITUALS —

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*THE GURDWARA*

The Sikh worship center, known as a Gurdwara, is the center of Sikh religious and social life. In the center of it are the Sikh scriptures, the Guru Granth Sahib, which are constantly being read by a Granthi through the day. Persons come to the worship center first and foremost to hear the Guru Granth Sahib read (or sometimes sung), and all persons are welcome. Sikhs bow before the book but never before people, for no person is better than another before God. The worship

center has four entrances facing each of the cardinal directions, inviting the world to enter. Persons must take off their shoes and cover their heads, but no one is excluded if they meet these simple requirements. Communal meals are provided at the worship centers, and again all are welcome.

### *RITUAL*

There is very little ritual among the Sikhs largely because of the negative response that Nanak provided when considering rituals. As noted above, real rituals for Nanak were not outward activities like making pilgrimages and bathing in the river, but rather were the reflections of religion such as compassion, justice, and mercy. Thus, even though there are some rituals among Sikhs today, they are minimal.

The most important ritual is that of initiation into the Khalsa. As we noted earlier, Guru Gobind Singh initiated the Five Beloved by splashing amrit into their eyes and onto their hair and then having them drink amrit from a common vessel. This still happens today, with the Five Beloved represented by any five baptized Sikhs, either male or female. Once initiated, persons are given the five Ks, and they are also given the Guru Mantra (chant), which is whispered into their ears. The chant is “Vahiguru,” the principal name used for God. In a Sikh meeting, if the volume begins to rise too high, someone will often begin to quietly say “Vahiguru, Vahiguru,” and



*Langar at a Langar hall and Gurdwara. Courtesy of Hari Singh.*

a neighbor will pick it up until it has traveled throughout the room and reverence is reestablished.

A second ritual relates to the Guru Granth Sahib, the sacred text. In the worship centers, the Granth is treated as royalty, with an attendant waving a fan to keep it cool and to keep bugs away from it during the day. At the end of the day, the Granth is ceremoniously carried in procession and put in an actual bed. In the morning it is awakened and ceremoniously returned to its “throne” in the Gurdwara as if it were a king.

Third, upon entering the Gurdwara, Sikhs will bow before the Granth. The Granth is the living Guru in their midst, the channel through which God is present in the community, and is thereby worthy of reverence. At a wedding, the only ritual is that of the bride and groom together walking around the Granth. As an extension of this activity before the Granth, a Sikh will occasionally be seen kissing the steps of the worship center. This is a symbol of respect for the community. In Indian society, younger persons will often greet parents or grandparents or other respected elders by touching their feet as a symbol of honor and respect. In Sikhism, the community as a whole deserves this respect.

Near many worship centers is a tank or manmade lake. Sikhs will dip themselves in these tanks as a symbol of immersion in the ocean of divinity. We need to remember that the ultimate goal of Sikhs is to find union with God and bliss in that union. This is what is symbolized as Sikhs immerse themselves in the water.

The Sikh greeting is “Sat Sri Akal,” meaning “God is true.” The author’s experience has been that Sikhs appreciate being greeted with these words, for it is the heart of their faith, and as a Latter-day Saint, I believe the affirmation is correct.

Even though the above is a relatively small collection of rituals, how did rituals develop at all, given Nanak’s attitude toward them? The answer lies in continuing revelation, for Sikhs believe that each Guru brought God’s presence into the midst of the real world. What was correct in Nanak’s day, which he perceived as being fraught with rituals that took the place of real religion, was gradually changed over time by later Gurus as they encountered new needs in the community. Religion is not static but alive. Even today, the Guru Granth Sahib speaks to new situations as the world changes.

## — WOMEN —

Women are absolutely equal to men in Sikhism. There is nothing a man can do that a woman cannot, though they may not choose to do all things in a given community. Women can be Granthis, reading from the Guru Granth Sahib, and can participate in the initiation ceremony, even giving the Guru mantra to the new initiate. Sikh women are also a much more public presence than Hindu or Muslim women tend to be. Since men and women are equal in marriage and in the faith, Sikhs recommend that Sikhs marry Sikhs, for to do otherwise dilutes the faith and does not enable husband and wife to share the deepest spiritual experiences of life.

Latter-day Saints and Sikhs both believe that men and women are equal to one another; yet at the same time, Sikhs in practice may demonstrate that women are a bit more equal than Latter-day Saints believe. There is no question in either faith that men and women are equal before God. They are. However, women in Sikhism can do *anything* that a man can do. This is not true in The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, for though equal, men and women have different roles in this life. Men hold the priesthood, and women do not. As a convert to Mormonism, the author is convinced that this latter practice is divinely inspired, for it gives men a clear role to fulfill and teaches them service, which the world ordinarily does not value. Most women already know that life is service, and while they may not hold the priesthood, they are not excluded from leadership in the church. As my wife said, “I have done everything as a Relief Society president that I ever hoped to do as a Methodist minister.” For Latter-day Saint men and women, there is not only equality but equality with diversity.

## — CONCLUSION —

Sikhism is an impressive religious tradition with which Latter-day Saints can find a sense of kinship. God and his holiness stand at the center of both traditions, and there is a strong sense that human beings are related to this God and that he loves us. We seek in the end to be with him and to share in his life. Because of that, we share common values and common lifestyles. Sikhism is a good example of how God works among all his children.

— NOTES —

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1. "Major Religions of the World Ranked by Number of Adherents," Adherents.com, last modified August 9, 2007, [http://www.adherents.com/Religions\\_By\\_Adherents.html](http://www.adherents.com/Religions_By_Adherents.html).
2. David S. Noss and John B. Noss, *A History of the World's Religions*, 9th ed. (New York: Macmillan College, 1994), 262.
3. Noss and Noss, *History*, 262.
4. Gurinder Singh Mann, *Sikhism* (Upper Saddle Ridge, NJ: Prentice Hall, 2004), 15.
5. Mann, *Sikhism*, 72–75.
6. Mann, *Sikhism*, 79.
7. Mann, *Sikhism*, 79.
8. Mann, *Sikhism*, 80.
9. Mann, *Sikhism*, 81.
10. Mann, *Sikhism*, 81–82.
11. Quoted in Noss and Noss, *History*, 265.
12. Quoted in Noss and Noss, *History*, 265.
13. The story of Arjan Dev is found in *Sikh Religion* (Detroit, MI: Sikh Missionary Center, 1990), 116–21.
14. *Sikh Religion*, 162.
15. *Sikh Religion*, 164.
16. Mann, *Sikhism*, 100.