



24. What Is Sikhism?

'There is one true and eternal creator, all-powerful, without fear and without hatred. God is eternal and infinite, self-existent and known only by grace.'

These are the opening words of the 'Guru Granth Sahib', the holy book of the Sikhs.

Sikhism was founded by the Guru Nanak, originally a Hindu, who was born near Lahore (now in Pakistan) in 1469 and died in 1539. He declared that God is beyond outward religious distinctions, and that what matters is for everyone to be a truly devout follower of his or her own faith. He spent the rest of his life teaching, travelling and discussing religion with Muslims and Hindus. The word 'Sikh' signifies learner or seeker; a 'Guru' is a teacher.

After Nanak, there were ten Gurus; by the time of the tenth, Guru Gobind Singh (1666-1708), the Sikhs were being persecuted as heretics by both Muslims and Hindus. He declared that there would be no more mortal Gurus. In future the Guruship would be shared by the Granth, which is a collection of sacred texts, some drawn from Muslim and Hindu sources, and by the Khalsa Panth, the core Sikh community.

The Khalsa are initiated by drinking and being sprinkled with Amrit, a mixture of sugar and water, which is consecrated by being stirred with a sword while prayers are recited. Members of the Khalsa bear the five 'Ks' - Kesh (uncut hair), Kanga (a comb), Kaccha (undershorts), Kara (a steel bangle), and Kirpan (sword). Each of these has a symbolic significance. A male Khalsa bears the name 'Singh' (lion), a female 'Kaur' (princess), signifying their willingness to die for their faith and to take up arms for the oppressed. Male Khalsa Sikhs wear a turban over their uncut hair. The smoking of tobacco or other drugs is forbidden.

In a Sikh Gurdwara or place of worship, the Guru Granth Sahib is placed on a special platform under a canopy and is treated with special reverence, as the focus of communal ceremonies. It is believed to be divinely inspired, and may not be handled by non-Sikhs. Hymns form the mainstay of Sikh worship. A free community meal is served at a Gurdwara for all, regardless of caste or creed.

Sikhs believe that everyone is equal before God, regardless of caste, creed or gender; that everyone

can be directly in touch with God; and that no religion has a monopoly of truth. Everyone should live a responsible life in the community; empty ritual is meaningless; true devotion includes both meditation on God and service to the community; social justice should be supported and may be upheld by force in the last resort.

For Sikhs, God, who is eternal and self-sufficient, without hatred or fear, created and upholds the universe. God has neither shape nor gender, and has never taken nor will take human form on earth. God's essence is truth. Sikhs believe that death is the transition to a new, fuller life in the presence of God.

As is well known, the Sikhs were highly regarded by the British during their time as rulers of India, mainly for their martial qualities and dignified bearing. There is much in the Sikh faith that is admirable. The denial that God has ever taken human form would appear to be as much a reaction to Hinduism as Christianity; indeed, Sikhs find the suggestion that their faith is in any way derived from that of the Hindus as offensive. The martial tradition in Sikhism derives from their historic position as a persecuted minority, and in present times has led to agitation and terrorism in support for an independent Sikh state in India.