

The Sikhs

Their Beliefs and Practices

by Johan D.Tangelder.

Canada is a nation of immigrants – either immigrants or descendants of immigrants. But recent arrivals to its shores are no longer from European nations but from Africa and Asia. Today, Canada features a kaleidoscope of colors and cultures, altering the complexion of its population. It is now pluralistic and multicultural; it features new social values, multiple moral options, and a phenomenal growth of ethnic communities. One of the latter is the Sikhs who form the country's largest South Asian ethnic group. In fact, they are Canada's largest Indian community and are a major link between the two countries.

Who are the Sikhs? Their religion is practiced by about 19 million worldwide. They come from a relatively small area of India, the Punjab province in the Northwest, where most Sikhs still live. Consequently, they are mainly identified with that region's people and culture. Today, Sikhs throughout the world have a renewed sense of identity. Some of them are even campaigning for an independent country centered on the Punjab province, which they want to call Khalistan. In colonial times, Sikh men formed an important part of the British army and thus migrated in small numbers throughout the British Empire. For a number of reasons many of them have gone to such countries as New Zealand, Australia and Canada.

Sikhs in Canada

The Sikhs (learners or disciples) are distinguished both as a religion and as an ethnic group. They are Caucasian (as are all East Indians), and belong to a distinctly non-Hindu religion. However, shortly after their arrival in Canada, though the Sikhs were easily discernable by their turban, the Sikh immigrants were usually referred to as Hindu. In 1904, for example, the census of British Columbia revealed the presence of 258 "Hindus" in the province; most of them were likely Sikhs. Today, they are mainly to be found in Vancouver, which has perhaps half of the total Canadian Sikh population. There are also Sikh communities in Ottawa, Montreal, Calgary and a fast growing one in Toronto. Many postwar Sikh immigrants are more urbane, educated, skilled, westernized and religiously untraditional than those who came earlier. In the 1960s and 1970s tens of thousands settled across Canada, especially in urban corridor from Toronto to Windsor.

Vancouver

Canada's Pacific rim is a strong magnet for Asian immigrants, the Sikhs included. Since their culture is family oriented (including the extended family) they try to stay together. If they cannot be with each other, they prefer ready travel access to their families in their homelands. Shortly after the dawn of the 20th century, a small contingent

of Sikhs arrived in Vancouver BC. This city eventually became the heart of their community in Canada. Since arriving in Vancouver, Sikhs have endured hardships and restrictions, but they are now a permanent part of the Canadian mosaic. More than 100,000 are now living there. This is the second largest concentration of Sikhs in the world. The famous Vancouver *Khalsa Diwan Society* was founded in 1907. It has influenced the Sikh's development in Canada from its very beginning. By 1920 Vancouver Sikhs alone had contributed \$300,000 to charitable causes in India and to the defense of the Sikhs in Canada. Through the Khalsa Diwan Society's leadership the Sikhs built their first permanent *gurdwara* (temple). The temple became the focus of much anti-British revolutionary activity. Today, the sky-domed Ross Street temple seats more than 2,000 on rich, red, wall-to-wall carpets covered with thick, white sheets. Free food is served to 400 in a sitting. The temple is open daily from dawn to dusk and is the center in which the community is built and flows.

The presence of the Sikhs and other ethnic/religious communities confront the Christian church with an unprecedented mission challenge. But is the church ready to take on the task?

The facts speak for themselves. It was reported at the 1999 Missionfest Vancouver, that only 2% of the Greater Vancouver Area is attending either an evangelical or charismatic church on any given Sunday. In other words, the church is in deep trouble in this Canadian urban center.

Calgary

The high tech & finance jobs related to oil have attracted many Sikhs to Alberta. In Calgary, the *Singh Society* finished the impressive Guru Nanak Centre in 1979 at the cost of \$850,000. The Centre operates as a meeting place for the Sikhs and a place where Punjabi language classes are taught.

Toronto

A CBC report on the 1996 census indicated that 47% of the population of the "Greater Toronto Area" was made up of people born outside of Canada. The Toronto Sikh community of approximately 130,000 is the fastest growing in Canada. Sikhs have an independent entrepreneurial tradition and many work for themselves. Many work in real estate, insurance and especially government service. Taxi drivers, factory hands and small business employees make up the rest.

Sikh Beliefs

The Gurus

Sikhism is a monotheistic religion based on the teachings of ten Gurus or teachers. The first of these was **Guru Nanak** (1469-1539) The Sikhs view him as their perfect example of piety and a person worthy of their deep devotion, though he is not worshipped. He swept aside the taboos and rituals of Hinduism and Islam. He taught that religious rituals are not necessary, but right conduct is. He traveled widely and

incorporated many ideas from the Hindu devotional tradition and indirectly from the Muslim Sufis into his own distinctive theology.

He rejected Hindu notions of caste, idol worship and bodily mortification, as well as the belief in salvation through ascetic isolation from worldly affairs. He composed many hymns in the vernacular for his disciples to sing and meditate on. When he died, he left 974 hymns, many written down and others committed to memory by his followers. He also left a disciplined community, living as householders, regarding work as a form of divine service, worshipping together and meditating on God's name daily. These characteristics still form the basis of Sikh life in the 21st century and give Sikhism its cohesion and uniqueness. The mainstream Sikh tradition teaches that Guru Nanak's ideas were elaborated by nine subsequent gurus or teachers.

Guru Angad (1504-52) is said to have had Nanak's teaching written in Punjabi. He also strengthened the unique Sikh practice of *Guru ka langar*, in which Sikhs repudiate aspects of caste by eating together. He also made a collection of hymns and wrote a biography of Guru Nanak. And he invented the Gurmukhi script, which means from the "mouth of the Guru."

Guru Arjun (c1563-1606) collected Sikh scriptures into a single volume, later termed the *Adi Granth*, which became the main scriptural base for Sikhism. He introduced a 10% tax on the income of all the community members to be used for a number of building projects. He also initiated the custom of bowing before the *Adi Granth* as the word of God.

The tenth and last Guru was **Gobind Singh** (1666-1708), who added the final elements to the religion. He was both a spiritual and military leader, who created the *Khalsa* or community of believers and provided them with the intellectual means to defend Sikhism from external oppression. He also renamed all male Sikhs *Singh* (Lion) and all women *Kaur* (Princess). Seeing death impending, the mainstream tradition holds that Guru Gobind Singh permanently passed on the spiritual leadership of the faith to the *Adi Granth*, naming it the *Guru Granth Sahib*. He stated that there would be no more gurus after him. He gave the Sikhs the five marks of their faith - the five K's.

The five K's

The controversial five K's of the orthodox Sikhs are: *Kes or Kesh* the uncut hair on a person's head and face. Long hair represents vitality and strength. *Kangha* is the small comb made of wood, ivory or plastic. It enables the Sikh to care for his hair and to keep it healthy. *Karan* is the steel bangle worn on the right wrist. It reminds the wearer of his unity with God and the Khalsa brotherhood. *Kacha* is the pair of shorts now worn as underwear. *Kirpan* is the steel sword and is about ten inches long. It is worn in the belt, but a miniature version is now more usually worn as a charm round a person's neck. It reminds the Sikhs to defend the poor, the oppressed and to uphold the truth. The Sikh women also wear kirpans. The five K's are the symbols of the Khalsa brotherhood which the initiates wear for the rest of their lives, and are worn by all members men and women. Since the five k's are very visible, the Sikhs are consequently more frequently the objects of racial discrimination than other South Asians.

The Turban

The characteristic of conservative Sikhs which has attracted most public attention is the turban. It is the hallmark of their religion and gives them a distinct public identity. When the Gurus encouraged the wearing of the turban, they did it partly to prevent non-Sikhs from being picked on and treated as Sikhs in times of local persecution, and they did it also to prevent the less courageous of their followers from deserting and merging with the crowd when the going became tough. The Sikhs who publicly demonstrate their allegiance by wearing turbans will be more likely to remain loyal to their faith than those who dispose with it and cut their hair.

Sikhs may wear any color of turban, and no color has any special meaning although organizations or the military may select a single color. The turban must be shaken and freshly wound each time. The Sikhs are not allowed to wear a cap, hat or helmet of European style. British and Indian traffic laws exempt them from wearing motorcycle helmets. However, not all Sikhs wear one, but only those who have been initiated. For someone to request its removal or, worse still, to knock it off, shows disrespect for the Sikh faith. It is not the same as asking someone to remove their hat – you are asking him to break a vow.

Women who have been received into full membership are expected to cover their heads at all time. Most women wear the *salwar kameez*; long trousers, matching top, and a thin scarf. But some have adopted western dress. However the salwar kameez is not specifically Sikh costume but, rather, Punjabi.

Gurdwara

The gurdwara (temple) is the Sikh's place of worship. It means the "abode of the Guru." Only a building in which there is a copy of the Guru Granth Sahib can be called a gurdwara.

Services are open to anyone who obeys the conventions for entering a temple: they must be shoeless with their head covered, and must refrain from smoking and drinking. Temple observances celebrate the various gurus and traditional calendrical celebrations. The temples are also used for marriages and funeral services. Public worship primarily involves the faithful assembling to recite teachings of the Gurus and to eat *langar*, the communal meal that is always available to anyone after a Sikh service.

Guru Granth Sahib

Guru Gobind gave the Sikh's scripture the name *Guru Granth Sahib*. Sahib means "Lord" and this personalizes the Sikh holy book. It is not just the message contained in the book. The book itself is the spirit of the Guru. Respect of the Guru Granth Sahib is at the heart of the Sikh faith. The vocabulary of the *Granth* is very different from the Punjabi the Sikhs use today. One of its interesting features is the inclusion of the writing of Hindu and Muslim holy men. Some of them are represented by only a verse or two, others by quite a large number. There are also references to Jesus. However, most Sikhs are not aware of His true identify.

Copies of the *Granth* are identical, anywhere in the world. Each has 1430 pages. There is no historical narrative or logical prose teaching as in the New Testament. Most second generation Sikhs speak Punjabi from an early age but must be formally taught the unique Sikh gurmukhi-written script in order to read from the *Guru Granth Sahib*.

The God of the Sikhs

God is one, without form, but pervading everything. The Sikh's view of God is contradictory and pantheistic. Both good and evil come from God. He is said to be the creator of the universe, but not apart from his creation. God is everything and everything is in Him. He is the fisherman and the fish, the water and the net. Since the Gurus were inspired by God, the Sikhs deny that God ever assumed human form. Guru Arjan said: "May the mouth burn by which it is said that the Lord becomes incarnate. He neither comes to nor departs from this earth." God is not jealous or sectarian and has no regard for human restrictions such as race, color, creed or caste. God's love is for all equally. He is truth. He is eternal and self-existent.

The way of salvation

Sikhism is not a missionary faith as Sikhs believe there are many ways to God. They cannot conceive of Jesus as the only way to God. So talking with them will not persuade them that Jesus is unique. They are fatalistic as they are influenced by Hindu *karma* and Islam *Kismet*. The Sikhs believe that the consequences of one's actions are reaped when one is born again in another body. The soul goes through a continuous round of births and deaths. Guru Nanak said, "We inhabited several plants and trees and were then reincarnated as animals. We were born as serpents of several species and then winged birds." He believed that the human birth is the best of all. Consequently, missionaries must be careful using Christian terminology when they approach Sikhs. If they talk to a Sikh about being born again, he will immediately think they are referring to reincarnation.

The way to know God and to obtain salvation is to *meditate* on his name and truth. Original sin is a foreign concept in Sikhism. Salvation is not by grace, but through good works. For some grace is merely God's reward in response to human efforts. God looks benignly upon man's efforts to save himself. Right living is essential to a proper relationship with Him. A devout Sikh will try to obey God's commandments and hopes that God will be gracious. Whether He is or is not is entirely up to His will. Sikhs do not believe in eternal damnation. All will eventually achieve deliverance from the bondage of this earthly life. Hence, no one is lost but is re-united with the divine absolute. Then there is no more coming and going from one life to the next, the cycles have been completed.

Missions

In the beginning of the 20th century, Canada was, per capita, the foremost missionary sending country in the world. In our new century, Canada is a mission field, with millions of people arriving who have not heard the Gospel before. Since there is still freedom in Canada to engage in mission work, churches have a unique opportunity to

reach out to the Sikh community, the most unreached ethnic group in North America. And they are reachable! In Vancouver and Toronto Sikhs are coming to Jesus Christ and embracing Him as Lord and Savior at great personal cost. A Sikh who becomes a Christian faces family and community pressure unknown to most Westerners. A young Sikh convert may well be turned out of his home and ostracized by the Sikh community. In Toronto, two United Reformed missionary families are now involved in a unique ministry among the Sikhs. Rev. Tony Zekveld and Rev. Eric Pennings use the Hope Centre as their ministry base. To be more effective, Rev. Zekveld learned to speak Punjabi and Rev. Pennings, who was recently installed as a missionary, is studying it. They visit families, individuals, distribute Punjabi Bibles, offer correspondence Bible study courses, literature and place advertisements. Recently, they have been encouraged with a good response through their follow-up of contacts. As these missionaries are busy with their daunting task of reaching the lost Sikhs for Christ and His church, they need prayerful support and encouragement.

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