

Faith and Society Files: Encountering Sikhs

In this document, author Paul Weller provides background information about Sikh beliefs and practices to aid dialogue.



Introducing people of different religions or beliefs

As set out in the resource on the *Religion or Belief Landscape of the UK*, (downloadable from www.baptist.org.uk/Articles/516106/Religion_or_Belief.aspx) Baptist Christians in the UK are likely to encounter people of various religion and belief traditions in a whole variety of ways and contexts. This can include at school/college/university; in work; in leisure contexts, in public settings; and when visiting places of worship.

We have produced a series of resources that aim to provide a brief introductory overview to people of other than Christian religions or beliefs. Just as Christians can understandably become uncomfortable and even distressed when words and concepts central to our understanding of Christianity are misused or misunderstood, so also can others be concerned when the words that they use are ignorantly misused or are replaced by other words that are not part of their traditions.

Even though this is rapidly changing, Christians in the UK have the relative advantage that many key Christian words and concepts have, over the centuries, entered into the English language. By contrast, many of the key words and concepts used by people of other than Christian traditions to signify things of importance to them can seem unfamiliar and perhaps, initially, off-putting. Using the terms that people use about themselves (and which, within these resources are signaled by the word or words concerned *appearing in italics*), we are respecting how our neighbours understand themselves and showing our readiness to learn how others describe themselves, their beliefs and practices.

Sikh Individuals, Communities and Organisations

Encountering Individual Sikhs

There are two ways in which other than Sikh people may first become aware that they are encountering a Sikh. Although not all Sikhs look the same, the first is often visual.

Being an initiated Sikh (though it should be noted not all Sikhs are initiated – see below on the *Khalsa Panth*) is usually outwardly marked by the wearing of the so-called 5Ks of Sikhism, which are known as such because the Punjabi for each word begins with the “k” sound. The 5 Ks, each of which is understood to have a spiritual and a practical significance - are:

- 1 *Kesh* (uncut bodily hair – the hair on the head usually being tied up in the distinctive turban)
- 2 *Kangha* (a small comb worn in the hair)
- 3 *Kara* (a steel bracelet)
- 4 *Kachhahera* (also known as kachchha or kachha – a garment of knee length and normally worn under other clothes)
- 5 *Kirpan* (a ceremonial sword)

The second is verbal.

Along with personal and family names which Sikh individuals may also use, all Sikh men have the religious name of *Singh*, which means ‘lion’, whilst Sikh women have the religious name of *Kaur*, meaning ‘princess’.

Encountering Sikh Communities

Sikhism does not acknowledge the validity of traditions based on varying doctrines, although there are groupings whose roots are to be found in various revivalist movements founded by individuals known by such titles as Sant, Bhai or Baba.

Within the community, there are also social groupings, such as *Ramgarhia* and *Bhatra*, which are related to economic categories and family histories. These words may be seen in the titles of Sikh organisations or places of worship.

There are also a range of groups and movements which understand themselves as being within the Sikh community but whose self-understanding in this regard is disputed, such as the *Namdhari*, *Sant Nirankari* and other similar groups.

Sikh Places of Worship

The Gurdwara

The Sikh place of congregational worship is called the *Gurdwara*, meaning 'doorway of the Guru'. It is usually recognisable from the outside by the *Nishan Sahib* (*Nishan* meaning 'flag' whilst *Sahib* is an honorific title of respect). This is a triangular saffron coloured flag with the *khanda* (*Khalsa* emblem) shown in black. The emblem includes a two-edged sword surrounded by a circle outside of which are two further swords, which together symbolise the temporal and spiritual sovereignty of God.

Gurdwaras are usually run by a committee that is elected by the congregation every two years or so, changing on Vaisakhi Day. Some *Gurdwaras* are led by a *sant* (individual spiritual leader). Any adult male or female Sikh is permitted to perform religious ceremonies but many *Gurdwaras* employ a *granthi* who is a professional reader of the *Guru Granth Sahib* and also usually responsible for its care.

Sikhism recognises no priesthood and all Sikhs are of equal status in religious terms. Sikh leaders may therefore be called *Bhai* (brother) or *Bhen* (sister). A *giani* is a learned and devout person who has meditated upon the *Guru Granth Sahib* and interprets its meaning to the congregation. There is often a regular group of *ragis* (singers and musicians) to help with *diwan*.

Sadh Sangat

Nam Japna, or meditation on God, is seen by Sikhs as both an important individual and congregational activity, with *sadh sangat* (congregational worship) being seen as particularly important. However, the *Gurdwara* is not only a place for formal worship, but it is also a centre for religious education and other activities such as Punjabi classes, youth clubs, women's groups, welfare provision and elderly day centres.

Visiting a Gurdwara

When visiting a *Gurdwara*, both male and female visitors should wear modest clothing, within which for women it is advisable to wear a long skirt or trousers. Head covering is essential for both women and men. A large clean handkerchief is seen as adequate for men, while women are expected to use scarves. The *Gurdwara* will usually have some head coverings available, but not necessarily enough for a large group of visitors. Tobacco, alcohol or drugs should never be taken into any of the *Gurdwara* buildings (not just the prayer hall).

Shoes should be removed before entering the prayer hall and may also need to be left off before entering the *langar* hall. Visitors may also be asked to wash their hands, which Sikhs do before entering to pray). Seating is on the floor which is usually carpeted, with men and women sitting in separate groups. If at all possible one should avoid one's feet being pointed towards the *Guru Granth Sahib*, or one's back being turned towards it since both these positions are considered disrespectful.

Guru Granth Sahib

On entering the prayer hall of the Gurdwara, one will see the Guru Granth Sahib (the Sikh sacred scripture) placed on a low platform, covered by a canopy. When Sikhs enter they touch the floor before this with their forehead and offer a gift such as food or money. Visitors may also bow in similar fashion as a mark of respect. But if they are uncomfortable with this for religious reasons, one may simply give a slight bow or stand in silence for a few moments before the Guru Granth Sahib as a mark of respect. A visitor would not be expected to give a gift, but if doing so, leave it with others in a wooden box, or on the floor in front of the Guru Granth Sahib.

Karah Prashad

At the end of the worship visitors may be offered Karah Prashad (holy food). This is a sweet pudding that has been blessed during the service. It is given to all to signify that all are equal and united in their humanity and that there are no caste distinctions. The Karah Prashad is made of butter, flour, sugar and water. It is therefore buttery in texture and hands need wiping after it has been received. Often, paper napkins are distributed for this purpose. If a visitor is, for religious reasons, uncomfortable about being receiving some of this sacred food, the person offering the food should be informed with a quiet 'No thank you.' If possible, it would be preferable in advance to explain to the hosts that this is because of personal religious position and not out of any disrespect. The same applies to langar (which is the food served in the communal kitchen at the Gurdwara) since this has also been blessed.

Langar

In keeping with the Sikh tradition of service, Gurdwaras often provide temporary accommodation for the needy. Langar, which is food served in the communal kitchen at the Gurdwara, is provided free of charge to all who attend the Gurdwara, including for 'outsiders' who are cordially welcomed. The food is vegetarian and will not contain meat, fish or eggs or their by-products. Because the food served in the langar has been blessed, head covering is usually maintained in the langar hall. Both Langar and Karah Prashad (see below) symbolise universal fraternity and equality, it being intended that all should eat together regardless of their social position as there are no strangers in the House of God.

Sikh Beliefs and Practices

Origins of Sikhism

Sikhism is rooted in the teachings of the ten Gurus, the first of which was Guru Nanak Dev (1469-1539), who was born at Talwandi in the Punjab. At the age of around thirty, he received a call to preach the Word of God. His message emphasised the oneness of God and the importance of honesty and integrity in the practice of any religion. The community which he founded became known as Sikhs, meaning disciples, or learners. In 1699, the tenth Guru, Guru Gobind Singh, instituted *Amrit Pahul* which initiates Sikhs into the *Khalsa Panth*, the community of initiated Sikhs.

The Divine

Sikhism is monotheistic and God is known among Sikhs by a variety of names including *Ram, Mohan, Gobind, Hari, Nirankar*, although *Satnam* (meaning 'true name') and *Waheguru* (meaning 'Wonderful Lord') are among the most used. The *Mul Mantar* is seen as encapsulating the heart of Sikhism. It states: 'There is but One God, the Eternal Truth, the Creator, without fear, without enmity, timeless, immanent, beyond birth and death, self-existent: by the grace of the Guru, made known.'

The Gurus

The Ten Gurus and their teaching, known as the *Gurbani* or *Gurshabad*, are viewed as a unity.

The Ten *Gurus* are:

- 1 Guru Nanak Dev (1469-1539)
- 2 Guru Angad Dev (1504-1552)
- 3 Guru Amar Das (1479-1574)
- 4 Guru Ram Das (1534-1581)
- 5 Guru Arjan Dev (1563-1606)
- 6 Guru Hargobind (1595-1644)
- 7 Guru Har Rai (1631-1661)
- 8 Guru Har Krishan (1656-1664)
- 9 Guru Tegh Bahadur (1622-1675)
- 10 Guru Gobind Singh (1666-1708)

The Scriptures

After the tenth *Guru*, the *Guru Granth Sahib* is seen as embodying the living and authoritative Word of God, whilst temporal authority is seen as vested in the *Khalsa Panth*, instituted by initiation of the *Panj Pyare* (five beloved ones) by Guru Gobind Singh in 1699. The *Guru Granth Sahib* is a title of honour for scriptures which are otherwise known as the *Adi Granth* and are written in the *Gurmurkhi* script. The *Dasam Granth* is also an important book which incorporates the work of a number of poets and also writings of Guru Gobind Singh.

The Khalsa Panth

The *Khalsa Panth* is seen as a community of equality that recognises no distinction of caste or gender. One who has taken *amrit* is known as an *Amritdhari Sikh*. *Keshdhari* is a term that can be used of Sikhs who adopt a beard, uncut hair and turban whether or not they have taken *amrit*. Those who believe in Sikhism, but have not yet been initiated or who have lapsed in their practice are sometimes known as *Sahajdhari* (literally, 'slow adopters').

Sikh Code of Conduct

The *Rahit Maryada* is the Sikh Code of Conduct which defines a Sikh as a believer in the following:

- 1 *Akal Purakh* (the one immortal God)
- 2 the ten Gurus
- 3 the *Guru Granth Sahib*
- 4 the *Gurbani*
- 5 *Amrit Pahul* and adheres to no other religion

Sikh Spiritual Life

Human life is seen as the opportunity for achieving *mukti*, or freedom from the cycle of rebirth, based upon the *karam* (actions and their consequences) of this life. The barriers to this are seen as:

- 1 *haumai* (self-centredness)
- 2 *kam* (lust)
- 3 *karodh* (anger)
- 4 *lobh* (greed)
- 5 *moh* (worldly attachment)
- 6 *hankar* (pride)

To overcome these barriers, the following qualities are needed:

- 1 *santokh* (contentment)
- 2 *dan* (charity)
- 3 *daya* (kindness)
- 4 *parsanta* (happiness)
- 5 *nimarta* (humility)

Sikhism has identified five stages on the journey to the divine:

- 1 *Dharam Khand* (realisation of spiritual duty)
- 2 *Gian Khand* (divine knowledge)
- 3 *Saram Khand* (wisdom and effort)
- 4 *Karam Khand* (divine grace)
- 5 *Sach Khand* (truth)

The spiritual life is seen as being something to be lived fully within this world, including marriage, family and work. The central principles of Sikh living are:

- 1 *nam japna* (reciting the name)
- 2 *kirat karna* (earning a living by honest means)
- 3 *vand chhakna* (sharing with the needy)
- 4 *sewa* (service to the wider community)

Sikh Calendar And Festivals

Sikh Calendar

Sikh beliefs and practices can often be encountered in more public spaces and ways that are marked in the Sikh calendar and festivals. Offering and sending appropriate greetings at special times for Sikhs is one way of recognising, acknowledging and celebrating their presence within the wider community.

In 2003 a committee of the Shiromani Gurdwara Parbandhak Committee ruled that Sikh festivals should be calculated by the Nanakshahi calendar. In practice this means that the majority of the dates, which had previously been calculated by the Vikrami (in Punjabi also known as Bikrami) calendar used by Hindus in north India, now have a fixed date in relation to the Gregorian/secular calendar. There are, however, exceptions which include the Hola Mohalla, Bandi Chhor Divas (Divali) and Guru Nanak's Birthday and in practice many Gurdwara festivals are celebrated at the weekend,

Sikh Festivals: Gurpurbs and Melas

Sikh festivals are of two types: *Gurpurbs* (which are anniversaries relating to the lives of the *Gurus*, including the scripture, the *Guru Granth Sahib*). *Gurpurbs* are marked by *akhand path*, *kirtan*, prayers, religious lectures, distribution of *karah prasad* and *langar*.

Gurpurbs include:

- Guru Nanak's Birthday (variable date in November)
- Martyrdom of Guru Tegh Bahadur (24 November)
- Guru Gobind Singh's Birthday (5 January)
- Martyrdom of Guru Arjan Dev (16 June)
- Installation of Scriptures in Harmandir Sahib in Amritsar in 1604 (1 September)

Melas (literally a 'fair') including the following (which Hindus also celebrate):

- Vaisakhi* or *Baisakhi* (13 or 14 April)
- Divali* or *Bandhi Chhor Divas* (October/November)
- Hola Mohalla* (March, but the date varies)

Vaisakhi celebrates the day in 1699 when Guru Gobind Singh founded the order of the *Khalsa* by offering *amrit* to the *Panj Pyare*, in turn receiving *amrit* from them, and on this day Sikhs usually replace the covering and pennant of the *Nishan Sahib* which flies outside *Gurdwaras*. There is often also a *nagar kirtan* (procession) in which the *Guru Granth Sahib* is carried through the streets, accompanied by *Panj Pyare*. Candidates are often initiated with *amrit* into the *Khalsa* early on *Vaisakhi*.

Hola Mohalla was started by Guru Gobind Singh as a gathering for mock battles and the use of martial arts, reminding Sikhs of the importance of courage and of being prepared to stand against tyranny and on behalf of justice.

Further Materials on Sikhs in the UK

For a more extensive introduction to Sikhs in the UK, see the chapter on 'Introducing Sikhs in the UK', in P Weller, ed (2007), *Religions in the UK: A Directory, 2007-10*, Derby: Multi-Faith Centre at the University of Derby in association with the University of Derby, pp 247-263, to which acknowledgement is made for having drawn upon some of the materials in summarised and, where appropriate, updated form.

Drafted by Paul Weller, Research Fellow in Religion and Society, Regent's Park College, University of Oxford and Associate Director (UK) of the Oxford Centre for Christianity and Culture, and produced by the Inter Faith Working Group of the Baptist Union.