

6

SIKHISM

CHAPTER



Sikhism is a highly visible religion relative to its size. There are only about twenty-three million Sikhs today, most living in the state of Punjab in northwestern India. Still, Sikhs are familiar to many. Approximately two million Sikhs live outside of India, and Sikh communities can be found today in most of the large cities of the West. Male Sikhs are especially recognizable because of the distinctive turban they wear. A strong sense of identity, maintained through such traditional aspects as the turban, has always been a hallmark of Sikhism.

Sikhs also are familiar because of various other notable features of their tradition. Sikhism has long been admired as a religion that tries to reconcile the great differences between Hinduism and Islam, the two religions of medieval India, where Sikhism arose. Sikhism is monotheistic, like Islam. It maintains that there is only one God, creator of the world and sovereign ruler over all. And yet Sikhism holds that human salvation depends on a mystical union with God, the same sort of experience that is central to most forms of Hinduism.

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Sikhs pay homage to Guru Nanak, the founder of Sikhism, in a crowded room in Lahore, Pakistan.

When Sikhism was founded about five centuries ago, Muslims ruled northern India. As the centuries passed, growing hostilities led to sporadic skirmishes. In 1799 Sikh military prowess overcame the Muslims, and an independent Sikh kingdom endured for nearly half a century. More recently, Sikh conflicts with Hindus culminated in the assassination of Indira Gandhi, prime minister of India, by members of her Sikh bodyguard, in 1984. The struggle for Sikh independence that led to that incident continues today, and in some respects, Sikhism maintains an uncomfortable relationship with India's Hindu majority.

On the other hand, in 2004 India elected Manmohan Singh to be Prime Minister—the first Sikh ever to hold such high office. This has given hope to many, Sikh and Hindu alike, that the sort of tensions that led to the bloody conflict of 1984 are largely in the past.

In this chapter, we will address various issues of Sikh identity—their history, beliefs, and practices. In doing so, we will see clearly how strong the Sikh sense of community is, no less so now that its numbers are spreading increasingly into the world community at large.

THE DEVELOPMENT OF SIKHISM: FROM GURU NANAK TO SHRI GURU GRANTH SAHIB

By the time Guru Nanak (1469 to 1539), the founder of Sikhism, had come on the scene, the important role of the guru had long been established in India. A **guru** (*goo'roo*) is a spiritual teacher, one who delivers people to a state of enlightenment.

Guru is an important concept for Sikhism. The word *sikh* literally means “learner” or “disciple”—that is, one who learns and follows the teachings of the Guru. The capitalized term *Guru* is used in three slightly different ways. For one, it is the title of Guru Nanak and his successors, the ten historical leaders of Sikhism. It also refers to the sacred text of Sikhism, the **Adi Granth** (*ah'dee gruhnth*), which is commonly referred to as Shri Guru Granth Sahib. Finally, it is a name for God, often in the form True Guru. In each case, the Guru functions as the revealer of Truth. As this chapter will explain, Sikhism teaches that God reveals the divine will, the Truth, to humans.

The ten historical Gurus of Sikhism were revealers of Truth. They are considered to be spiritually more capable than ordinary people, but not divine and not deserving of worship. Still, the Gurus continue to be respected and admired for their spiritual gifts and for their achievements as leaders of the Sikh community. Along with their fellow Sikhs, the Muslim emperors who ruled northern India tended to respect the Gurus, in some cases developing strong friendships with them.

The Life of Guru Nanak

Nanak was born in 1469 in a small village near Lahore (in present-day Pakistan). He was born to Hindu parents of the warrior

class. His parents arranged for him to marry in his teens, as was customary. Soon he and his wife had two sons.

Nanak seems from his early years to have sought more from life than was offered by the traditional setting into which he was born. This includes more with regard to religion, for he rejected traditional forms of Hindu worship and instead sought out the company of men, both Hindu and Muslim, who were inclined toward contemplative practices. He settled on belief in one God, to whom he could move nearer through meditation and the singing of hymns. Eventually Nanak began composing his own hymns with his friend Mardana, a Muslim musician.

Nanak was a spiritual leader in his community even at this early stage of his life. Along with continuing his practice of meditation, Nanak led others in singing hymns of praise. When Nanak was about thirty years old, he experienced the revelation of God, an event that marks the founding of the Sikh religious tradition.

Receiving God's Revelation

One time when Nanak made his customary morning walk to bathe in a nearby river, he did not return to the village for three days, and then remained silent for yet another day. When he finally spoke, he proclaimed:

There is no Hindu and no [Muslim] so whose path shall I follow? I shall follow God's path. God is neither Hindu nor [Muslim] and the path which I follow is God's.

(Cole and Sambhi, *The Sikhs*, page 10)

Nanak explained that he had been escorted to the court of God, who gave him a cup of nectar and told him:

This is the cup of the adoration of God's name. Drink it. I am with you. I bless you and raise you up. Whoever remembers you will enjoy my favour. Go, rejoice

guru (*goo'roo*)

A spiritual teacher and revealer of truth, common to Hinduism, Sikhism, and some forms of Buddhism. When the word *Guru* is capitalized, it refers to the ten historical leaders of Sikhism, to the sacred text (Shri Guru Granth Sahib, or Adi Granth), and to God (often as True Guru).

Adi Granth (*ah'dee gruhnth*; Punjabi: “first book”)

Sikhism's most important sacred text and, since it was installed as Guru in 1708, Sikhism's earthly authority; also called Shri Guru Granth Sahib.

in my name and teach others to do so. I have bestowed the gift of my name upon you. Let this be your calling.

(Pages 10–11)

The Journeys of Guru Nanak

This experience profoundly influenced Guru Nanak, who spent the next twenty years of his life, from age thirty to about fifty, on a series of four long journeys, reaching as far as Mecca and Baghdad. He visited holy sites and encountered a wide variety of religious people, and he proclaimed and practiced his own teachings.

Several incidents during Guru Nanak's travels shed light on the new message he proclaimed. On one occasion, while visiting a famous Hindu shrine, he found himself among *brahmins* throwing water

toward the rising sun as an offering to their dead ancestors. Nanak turned and threw water the other way, explaining, "If you can send water to your dead ancestors in heaven, surely I can send it to my fields in the Punjab" (Singh, "Sikhism," in *The Encyclopedia of Religion*, volume 13, page 316). Such stories illustrate Nanak's consistent rejection of traditional rituals.



ACTIVITY

Guru Nanak spent about twenty years journeying from place to place and developing his spiritual perspective. In your view, how might travel to distant places and encounters with foreign forms of religion nurture spiritual growth?

Volunteers from the Sikh community prepare food outside of the community kitchen of the Golden Temple at Amritsar. Many thousand people per day share in the communal meal.



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The Golden Temple at Amritsar provides Sikhs with an inspiring geographical center.

Founding the Sikh Community

Guru Nanak attracted a large group of followers. At about the age of fifty, he established a new town where he and his followers formed the first Sikh community and established the lifestyle that characterizes Sikhism to this day. Sikhs refer to their community in its entirety as the **Panth**.

Guru Nanak erected a special building for worship. This provided the model of the *gurdwara* (goor'dwah-ruh), which is the central structure of any particular Sikh community. Guru Nanak sat on a special seat within the *gurdwara*. Today the Adi Granth, Sikhism's sacred text, functions as Guru and occupies the special seat in a *gurdwara*. Nanak also built accommodations for the many people who came to visit him.

In 1539, after leading the newly formed Sikh community for about twenty years, Guru Nanak died. Upon becoming aware of his approaching death, the Guru settled a dispute regarding the proper disposal of his body. In keeping with their respective traditions, his Hindu followers intended to cremate him, and the Muslims planned to bury

him. Nanak instructed both groups that when he died, the Hindus should lay flowers at his right side, and the Muslims at his left. Those whose flowers were still fresh in the morning were to do as they wished with his body. The Guru covered himself with a sheet in preparation for death. When the sheet was removed after he died, the body was gone, and the flowers on both sides were still fresh. Even with his death, Guru Nanak helped to settle the differences between Hinduism and Islam. (Today Sikhs generally cremate their dead.)



ACTIVITY

Although he probably did not intend to found a new religion, Guru Nanak was so inspirational that his followers united to form Sikhism. Which three or four characteristics of Guru Nanak, or events in his life, do you think were most responsible for the establishment of Sikhism? Describe how those characteristics or events might have inspired his followers.

Panth

The Sikh community.

gurdwara
(goor'dwah-ruh;
Punjabi: "doorway
of the Guru")

A special building that is reserved for Sikh worship and houses a copy of the Adi Granth; the central structure of any Sikh community.

The Evolution of Sikhism: Contributions of Nanak's Successors

Guru Nanak has remained the most prominent and revered of the ten Gurus of the Sikhs. Yet his successors, each in his own way, contributed significantly to the development of the religion.

Guru Arjan

Arjan (spiritual leader from 1581 to 1606), the fifth Guru, compiled the *Adi Granth*, thus giving the Sikhs their sacred scripture. He also constructed at Amritsar the great *Hari Mandir* ("God's Temple"), later named *Darbar Sahib* ("Court of the Lord") and commonly called the Golden Temple. This provided the Sikhs with a geographical center. In contrast with Hindu temples, which typically have one door, the Temple of God was designed with four doors, representing Sikhism's openness to people of all four classes of the prevalent Hindu caste system, and to all four directions.

The role of the Guru as both the spiritual and temporal leader gained greater emphasis during Arjan's time. He was a worldly leader friendly with Akbar, the great Muslim emperor, though eventually Arjan's participation in worldly affairs resulted in his imprisonment and death by torture. Arjan's fate led Sikhism to take on a more pronounced political and military dimension that has endured in various forms to the present day. Before Arjan died, he presented his son, his successor, with two swords, one representing spiritual power and the other, worldly power.



ACTIVITY

Guru Arjan initiated a long history of Sikh involvement in political and military affairs. Do you see any relationships between religion and political or military affairs in the world today? Try to describe two such relationships.

Guru Gobind Singh: The Last of the Ten Gurus

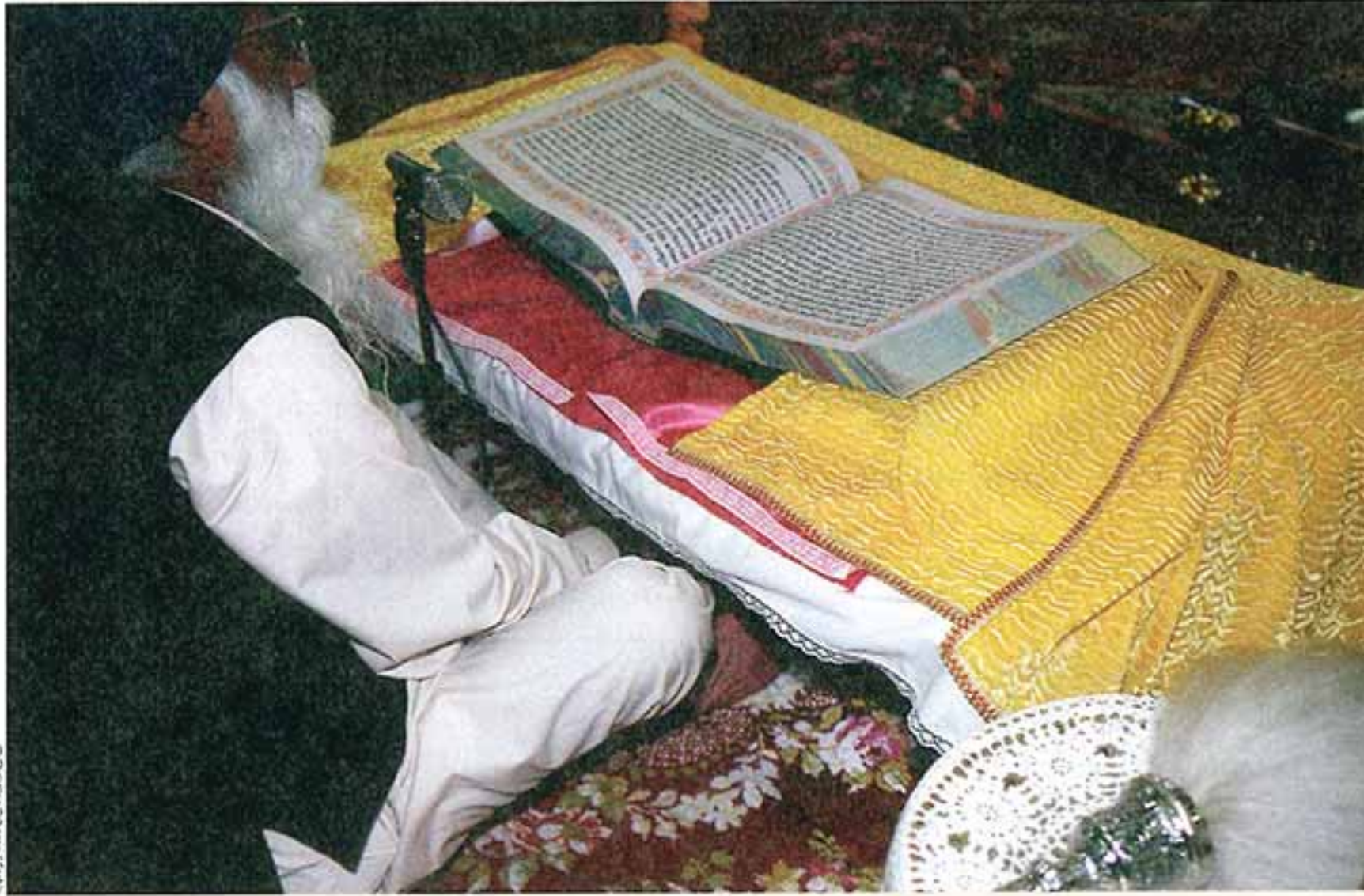
The tenth Guru, Gobind Singh (spiritual leader from 1675 to 1708), is revered as the greatest Guru after Nanak. His strength of character and spiritual adeptness made him a successful and memorable leader. Guru Gobind Singh contributed significantly to the growth of Sikh militarism. He engaged in many armed conflicts during a period when revolts against the Muslims were common.

Most notably, Guru Gobind Singh brought about two fundamental changes to the Sikh tradition. He founded the Khalsa, which would redefine the Panth, or Sikh community; and he installed the *Adi Granth*, the sacred scripture, as Guru, thereby ending the succession of human Gurus as leaders of the religion.

The Khalsa: The Pure Ones

In a period of great unrest and violent confrontations between Sikhs and Muslims in 1699, the Sikhs had gathered to celebrate an annual festival. Guru Gobind Singh, perceiving a desperate need for loyalty and cohesion among the Sikhs, stood before those who had gathered. Raising his sword, he challenged any Sikh who was willing to die for him to come forward. An uncomfortable silence followed. Finally, one man stepped out of the crowd and followed Guru Gobind Singh into the leader's tent. The stunned crowd heard the thud of a falling sword. Then the Guru emerged alone, with bloodstained sword in hand. Another man stepped forward, and the process was repeated. Three more men followed in turn. The crowd waited in silence. Eventually Guru Gobind Singh emerged with all five men, alive and well.

These men have ever since been known as the five beloved ones. They were the original members of the **Khalsa** (khal'sah), the Pure Ones, an order within Sikhism based



A Sikh teacher reviews the Adi Granth in its place of honor in the *gurdwara*.

on the principle of loyalty exhibited by these men. The Guru had the five men initiate him into the Khalsa, and soon thousands more, both men and women, joined. All the men were given the additional name Singh, meaning “lion.” All the women were given the name Kaur, which means “princess.” To this day, most Sikhs bear the name Singh or Kaur.



ACTIVITY

Imagine yourself as a Sikh in a crowd celebrating an annual festival in 1699. Suddenly your leader, Guru Gobind Singh, challenges anyone who is willing to die for him to come forward. What are your thoughts as you decide whether to step from the crowd?

Guru Gobind Singh’s Successor

Guru Gobind Singh was mortally wounded by an enemy sword. Before dying, it is said, he officially installed the Adi Granth as the next Guru. This was obviously a significant step in the development of Sikhism. Until it was taken, leadership of the Sikh community passed from human hands. Ever since it occurred, the earthly authority of the religion has been the scripture.

The Adi Granth: Sikhism’s Greatest Attraction

Ever since Guru Gobind Singh installed it as Guru in 1708, the Adi Granth has been regarded just as the Gurus were. As noted above, the Adi Granth now occupies the same special seat in the middle of a *gurdwara* that once would have been occupied by the

Khalsa (khal’sah; Punjabi: “pure ones”)

An order within Sikhism to which most Sikhs belong, founded by Guru Gobind Singh in 1699.

human Guru. Whereas Sikhs once looked to the Gurus as the authorities on religious matters, they now consult the Adi Granth.

Adi Granth literally means “first book.” Sikhs commonly express their reverence for the scripture by referring to it as the Guru Granth Sahib (*sahib*, like *guru*, is a title of respect). Every copy is identical in script and has 1,430 pages. The Adi Granth is primarily in the Punjabi language. In recent years, English and French translations have become available.

The Adi Granth is remarkable not only for its profound theological content but also for its poetic and musical brilliance. It is made up of hymns composed by six of the Sikh Gurus along with several other religious figures of medieval India. Notable among those others is the poet Kabir (about 1440 to 1518), whose religious perspective was very similar to that of Guru Nanak.

The Adi Granth rings with brilliance when it is put to music and proclaimed in its original language, Punjabi. It has been said that “the poetic excellence, the spiritual content, and the haunting, lilting melodies of the hymns of the Adi Granth are Sikhism’s

greatest attraction to this day” (Singh, “Sikhism,” in *The Encyclopedia of Religion*, volume 13, page 319).



ACTIVITY

The Adi Granth features written material and musical accompaniment. Imagine the lyrics of a favorite song without any musical accompaniment. How does this alter their impact? How might a sacred text like the Adi Granth be strengthened by musical accompaniment?

RELIGIOUS TEACHINGS: GOD, HUMANS, AND SALVATION

The religious teachings of Guru Nanak and his successors, as conveyed through the Adi Granth, present a rare combination of monotheism, the predominant theology of Western religions, and mysticism, a prevalent theology among Eastern religions. They reveal that the ultimate purpose of life is to attain complete

SIKH NAMES

The names Singh and Kaur—for men and women, respectively—normally correspond to English last names. First names are determined shortly after birth. During a highly ritualized naming ceremony, the Adi Granth is randomly opened and a name is chosen that begins with the opening letter of the composition appearing on its left-hand page. No distinction is made between boys’ first names and girls’ first names; the “last names” Singh and Kaur identify gender.

union with God. This state of spiritual fulfillment corresponds in an important way with Hindu *moksha* (and sometimes Sikhs use the same term to describe it), for it constitutes liberation from *samsara*, the cycle of death and rebirth, also familiar to Hinduism, Buddhism, and Jainism. The experience of union with God is eternal bliss, and it is indescribable—beyond human thought and language.

God: Formless One, Creator, True Guru

Guru Nanak's understanding of the nature of God is the center from which all Sikh teachings evolve. The Adi Granth begins with a concise summary of Sikh theology, known as the Mool Mantra:

This Being (God) is One; the truth; immanent in all things; Sustainer of all things; Creator of all things. Immanent in creation. Without fear and without hatred. Not subject to time, formless. Beyond birth and death. Self-revealing. Known by the Guru's grace.

(Cole and Sambhi, *The Sikhs*, page 70)

Sikh theology is similar to the theology of the monotheistic traditions of the West: Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. God is one, eternal, beyond time, and beyond spatial constraints ("formless"). The last description is frequently used in the Adi Granth: God is the Formless One, beyond all attributes that humans use to describe reality. God is referred to as "he" in Sikhism because there is no neuter pronoun in the Punjabi language of the Adi Granth. Sikhs actively strive to avoid assigning human attributes, such as gender, to God.

Sikhs believe that for reasons beyond the grasp of human comprehension, God decided to create the world and all that is in it, including human beings. In addition

to being the Creator, he is also the Preserver and the Destroyer. Here Sikhism draws from the important Hindu triad of gods: Brahma (Creator), Vishnu (Preserver), and Shiva (Destroyer). The Sikhs reject Hindu polytheism, however, insisting that their God is one. Their three names for God thus reflect different aspects of the one God.

In God's primary state, to which the Gurus refer when they use the name Formless One, God is distinct from his creation in much the same way an artist remains distinct from her or his artwork. And yet God dwells within creation—within nature and within human beings. God is thus said to be **immanent**, or indwelling (as opposed to transcendent, or beyond creation). In this state of immanence, God is personal and can be approached through loving devotion. Because of God's immanence in creation, it is possible for humans to make contact with God and come to know him. Just as one can know something of an artist by seeing the artist's works, so too can one come to know God through experiencing his creation. Indeed, part of the ongoing purpose of creation is that God, through his loving grace, might reveal the divine self to human beings. It is in this capacity of immanence that God is referred to as Guru, for by revealing himself, God delivers humans from darkness to enlightenment.



ACTIVITY

The image of God in Sikhism is in some ways similar to the image of God in Western religious traditions, and in some ways similar to the image of God in Hinduism. Describe the Sikh God in your own words, including references to those similarities.

immanent

Indwelling; Sikh theology maintains that God dwells within nature and within human beings in such a way that God is personal and can be approached through worship.

haumai (how'may; Punjabi: "self-reliance," "pride," or "egoism")

The human inclination toward being self-centered rather than God-centered, an inclination that increases the distance between the individual and God.

hukam (huh 'kahm)
The divine order of the universe.

Sikh children light candles as part of their loving devotion on a holy day, the birthday of one of the revered Gurus.

The Human Condition: Self-Centered and Bound to *Samsara*

Sikhism regards human beings as being in close relationship with God, who is believed to dwell within everyone. God is actively concerned about the spiritual welfare of each individual. However, humans tend to neglect this special relationship, and all too easily do not center their lives on God.

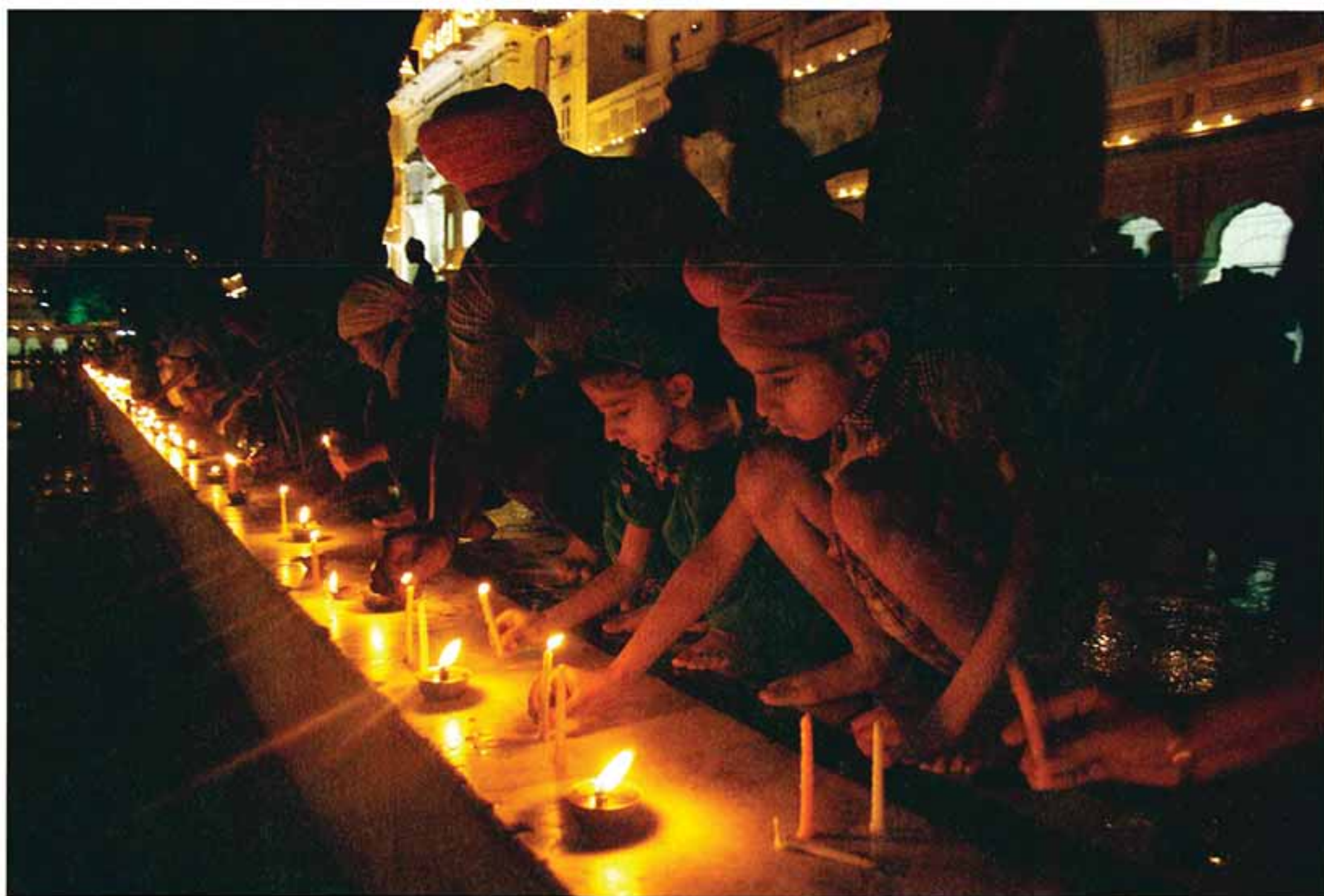
Rather than being God-centered, humans are inclined to be self-centered. This primary shortcoming of the human condition is expressed by the Sikh term *haumai* (how'may). This term is difficult to translate precisely into English but means something like "self-reliance," "pride," or "egoism." Because of *haumai*, humans strive too much to make do on their own rather than to acknowledge dependence on God. *Haumai* is accompanied by five vices—lust, anger, greed, attachment,

and pride. The effect of *haumai* and its vices is to increase the distance between a person and God, thereby eroding the special relationship that God intends.

The erosion of an individual's special relationship to God is made even worse because of ignorance. Rather than seeking to be nearer to God, humans in their ignorance tend to seek the attractions of this world. And so as long as ignorance, *haumai*, and *haumai's* vices persist, humans are destined to remain in *samsara*, the ongoing cycle of death and rebirth.

Salvation: Union with God

Humans tend in their ignorance to be wrongly attached to the charms of the world. But the world, being God's creation, is good. In fact, it is necessary for salvation. Creation allows people to move closer to God.



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God's presence in creation is perceivable in *hukam* (huh'kahm), the divine order. In other words, the stamp of God's role as Creator is left on the world. The quest for salvation involves an ongoing struggle between *haumai*, egoism and the self-centeredness to which humans are naturally inclined, and the desire to live in accordance with the will of God, as expressed through *hukam*, the divine order that permeates the created world.

God is believed to play an essential role in determining the outcome of this struggle, for it is God's grace that enables humans to perceive God. Having received God's grace, they are called to respond in loving devotion through meditation on the nature of God. The term most often used in the *Adi Granth* to denote the nature of God is *nam*, the "divine Name." Meditation on the *nam* or recitation of the *nam* is repeatedly prescribed as the path to spiritual fulfillment. Related terms are also used to refer to the object of meditation: the Word, Truth, the Divine Order. These are all ways of expressing the immanence of God in creation.

For Sikhism, salvation amounts to moving beyond all human shortcomings to a state of complete union with God. This state is said to be eternal, infinitely blissful, and forever beyond the cycle of death and rebirth.



ACTIVITY

In Sikhism, God's creation can be a hindrance because of human attachment to it, but it is also necessary for salvation because it reveals God's will, or *hukam*. How does creation relate to your spiritual life? Is creation completely good? Or does it present some problems?

THE RELIGIOUS LIFE: WORSHIP, RITUAL, AND LIFESTYLE

Guru Nanak is known to have rejected to some extent the traditional religious life of Hinduism and Islam. Focused as he was on seeking the indwelling God through meditation on God's nature, Nanak tended to regard the external forms of religion as useless.

Still, Guru Nanak instituted certain practices that amounted to a Sikh way of life. His successors continued to define that way of life, with the most notable innovations coming from the last successor, Guru Gobind Singh. The *Khalsa*, the order of the Pure Ones, is especially rich in symbolism and ritual practice.

Sikh Worship in the *Gurdwara*

The Sikh house of worship is called the *gurdwara* ("doorway of the Guru"). Every *gurdwara* contains a copy of the *Adi Granth*, which is placed on a cushion and under a canopy. Most *gurdwaras* have a characteristic Sikh architectural and decorative style, with minarets and chalk-white paint.

The *gurdwara* serves mainly as a place for Sikhs to congregate for worship. This they do frequently, on no particular day of the week. Usually worship takes place in the evening, though the early morning is also a popular time. Worship in the *gurdwara* is preceded by bathing and consists of singing the Gurus' hymns, reading from the *Adi Granth*, or telling a story about one of the Gurus. No formal requirements govern the exact nature of worship, but it generally ends with a sharing of a special cake made of wheat, ghee (clarified butter), sugar, and water. This act is symbolic of the unity of the Panth, or Sikh community.

The sharing of food is central to Sikhism. Each *gurdwara* generally has within it

a community kitchen, where Sikhs gather at various times to share in the preparation and consumption of a meal. This illustrates that the community is one unit, regardless of the caste status of its individual members. In addition, it provides food for those who are needy.



ACTIVITY

Compare Sikh worship in the *gurdwara* with the forms of worship that are familiar to you. What are the similarities? What are the differences?

The Khalsa: Entry into the Community of Pure Ones

Perhaps the most vivid ritual of Sikhism is the ceremony of initiation into the Khalsa. The initiate should be at least fourteen years old. He or she must possess the Five Ks (so named because of the Punjabi terms for these

requirements, each of which begins with a *k*): uncut hair, a comb, an iron wrist guard, a sword or knife, and a pair of shorts. Interpretations vary as to the precise meaning of the rich symbolism of the Five Ks, but their primary purpose is to strengthen Sikh identity.

The ritual is performed by five people, recalling the original initiation of Guru Gobind Singh by the beloved five. The *Adi Granth* is opened, and one of the five explains the basic principles of Sikhism to the initiates, who are asked if they are willing to accept them. The initiates are then served nectar made from water and sugar, which has been mixed in an iron bowl and stirred with a two-edged sword while hymns are recited. The nectar is drunk and sprinkled on the eyes and heads of the initiates who recite the *Mool Mantra*. The initiates are instructed about the ethical requirements of the Khalsa, which include prohibitions against cutting one's hair, eating meat that has been improperly slaughtered, engaging in extramarital sexual relations, and using tobacco. The initiation ends with a sharing of the special cake.

FROM GURU NANAK'S JAPJĪ

Guru Nanak's Japjī (juh-p'jee) is among the compositions of the Adi Granth that constitute Sikhism's early morning prayers. Here is the fourth section of that prayer. Note its emphasis on meditating on the divine Name as a means to liberation through union with God.

The Eternal One whose Name is Truth speaks to us in infinite love. Insistently we beg for the gifts which are by grace bestowed. What can we offer in return for all this goodness? What gift will gain entrance to the hallowed Court? What words can we utter to attract this love? At the ambrosial hour of fragrant dawn meditate on the grandeur of the one true Name. Past actions determine the nature of our birth, but grace alone reveals the door to liberation. See the Divine Spirit, Nanak, dwelling immanent in all. Know the Divine Spirit as the One, the eternal, the changeless Truth.

(Quoted in McLeod, *Sikhism*, page 272)



Any building that contains a copy of the *Adi Granth* qualifies as a *gurdwara*, a Sikh house of worship. Here the *Adi Granth* is wrapped beneath a canopy.

The founding of the Khalsa by Guru Gobind Singh is the single most important event in the history of Sikhism since the time of Guru Nanak. Though a rather small percentage of Sikhs have undergone the traditional rites of initiation, approximately 70 percent of Sikhs are popularly considered to be members of the Khalsa, in that they typically observe the Five Ks (or at least the one they consider most important, not cutting their hair) and other central teachings. Regardless of percentages or degrees of membership, the traditional ways of the Khalsa influence to a large extent the practices and customs of the entire Panth.

Like most aspects of Sikh religious life, the Khalsa strengthens the social identity of the community. Like any religious community, however, the Panth varies from place to

place. For example, in the West most Sikhs do not follow the prohibition against cutting their hair, partly because Western society considers long hair to be impractical and sometimes even because of employers' regulations.



ACTIVITY

The Five Ks of the Sikh Khalsa primarily strengthen Sikh identity. What similar symbols do you see in your own religious tradition or the traditions of people around you? How do you think those symbols strengthen a sense of identity among the members of the religions that use them?

AN INTERVIEW WITH A SIKH

Jaspreet Kaur Dhillon was born in the Punjab, India, and immigrated with her family to the United States while still a child. She spent her teenage years in California and now is a university student there. In this interview, Jaspreet shares her perspectives on being Sikh in these quite divergent settings.

I was born in Punjab, India, and I lived there half of my life. I remember going to Golden Temple when I was six or seven years old. One of the things that really stood out for me was that in the Golden Temple, thousands and thousands of people every single day go to *langar*, where they serve food 24-7. Guru Nanak Dev Ji established the *langar* when he was given money by his dad to buy a business, and instead he bought food and gave it to people who could not feed themselves. Therefore it's called Guru's *langar*, and so "free food from the Guru's house." Anybody is welcome to go. It does not matter which race or ethnicity you are. Everyone is equal in the house of the Guru.

At the Golden Temple, people like to sit on the ground so that everyone is on an equal platform and no one is above another. That's why they sit on the ground, even in the worship house. Nowadays here in America they have a raised platform or a couch for older individuals, if they can't sit on the ground, but usually there is just one platform so that they do not think that they are superior to others in the hall.

Here in America, it's not the same as the Golden Temple, but the values or the religion or the teachings that are practiced are the same throughout, because they use Guru Granth Sahib as their living God. And so every *gurdwara* that you walk into has Guru Granth Sahib on the raised platform in front. That's the only person that sits on the raised platform. When you walk into the hall, you bow down to the Guru, you get *prasad*, and then you go back and you listen to the teachings of the priest that reads the hymns of Shri Guru Granth Sahib. After that you go into the *langar* hall where you get in the line and get whatever food is being prepped that day. And you sit on the same platform and share the same food with everybody.

My parents have modified their views over time just to live in this country. Before they would be really strict about what I could and what I could not do as a Sikh woman. Now they have given me so much freedom to live away from home so that I can fulfill my hopes and dreams. They always say, Just remember you are Sikh and don't do anything that Baba Ji would not appreciate. I still go to the *gurdwara* as much as I can. I sit there and I listen to the priests sing the hymns of the Guru Granth Sahib. And I also have the text, with Punjabi on one side and English on the other, at my house, and also a picture of Baba Guru Nanak. I sit in front of the picture and read through the Guru Granth Sahib. This is one of the ways I try to practice the religion even though I live away from home.

Regarding the Khalsa, I am not baptized, so I do not wear all Five Ks. My grandmother is baptized, so I've always seen her wear all five, like all members

of the Khalsa. Once they have their uncut hair tied, they must put a *kangha* in it to symbolize cleanliness. They must have a *kirpan*, a small sword that Shri Guru Gobind Singh Ji first gave to his five individuals that he baptized as a sign to protect themselves. This does not mean that they take it out and try to hurt anybody. Some wear the *kirpan* on their body. Some people like to wear the small one around the neck, and some people like my grandmother still wear the small one around their body. All Sikhs, baptized or not, normally wear the *karā* on their wrist. If they do something bad, something that would not be accepted by the Guru, they must look at the *karā* and kind of back their hand off. So it's a sign that the Guru is watching you. So this is what I'm wearing on my right hand too. Even when a child is born, the parents go to the *gurdwara* and get the child a *karā*. So from a very young age, Sikh kids usually wear a *karā* on their hand. This is the only thing that I could wear.

The next question was about the fact that some people accuse Sikhs of being terrorists. The woman interviewed recalled the tragic incident on August 5, 2012, when a gunman killed six people at a gurdwara in Oak Creek, Wisconsin.

I've seen false perceptions of Sikhs as terrorists plenty of times. In the most recent incident, I was at the mall with my friend who wears the turban, and a guy passed by us and said something like: "Take that turban off. You're a terrorist." So people still view the turban, or they still view Sikhs as being terrorists. In part to counter such false perceptions, in March of 2012, one of my friend's brothers started an organization named Seva. In the beginning it was just like a bunch of kids getting together to make food. It started off with going to the Mission District in San Francisco and feeding homeless people. It went from feeding one hundred people to feeding over five hundred people. When the Wisconsin shooting happened, they raised over \$2,000 overnight, which they hand delivered.

The two founders of Seva even had the opportunity to go to the White House and meet President Obama. It is based on *langar*, but we don't label it with anything that has religion on it because we don't want people to think it's like a religious organization. But still, the value behind it is based on giving to others who are less fortunate, and that value was started by Guru Nanak Dev Ji.

I think all of the values that I have learned from Guru Granth Sahib and that my parents have taught me over the years are embedded inside of me, so that I don't think I could separate myself from being a Sikh or from trying to follow the values or the teachings that my parents have taught me about being a Sikh. It's the way I was brought up, and there are certain things I think I should and should not do. So this is why I still try to do what the Shri Guru Granth Sahib has taught us: To go to the *gurdwara*, to pray, to try to give to others. This is why I take part in Seva. I try to follow what Guru Granth Sahib has taught and what all the Gurus have taught.

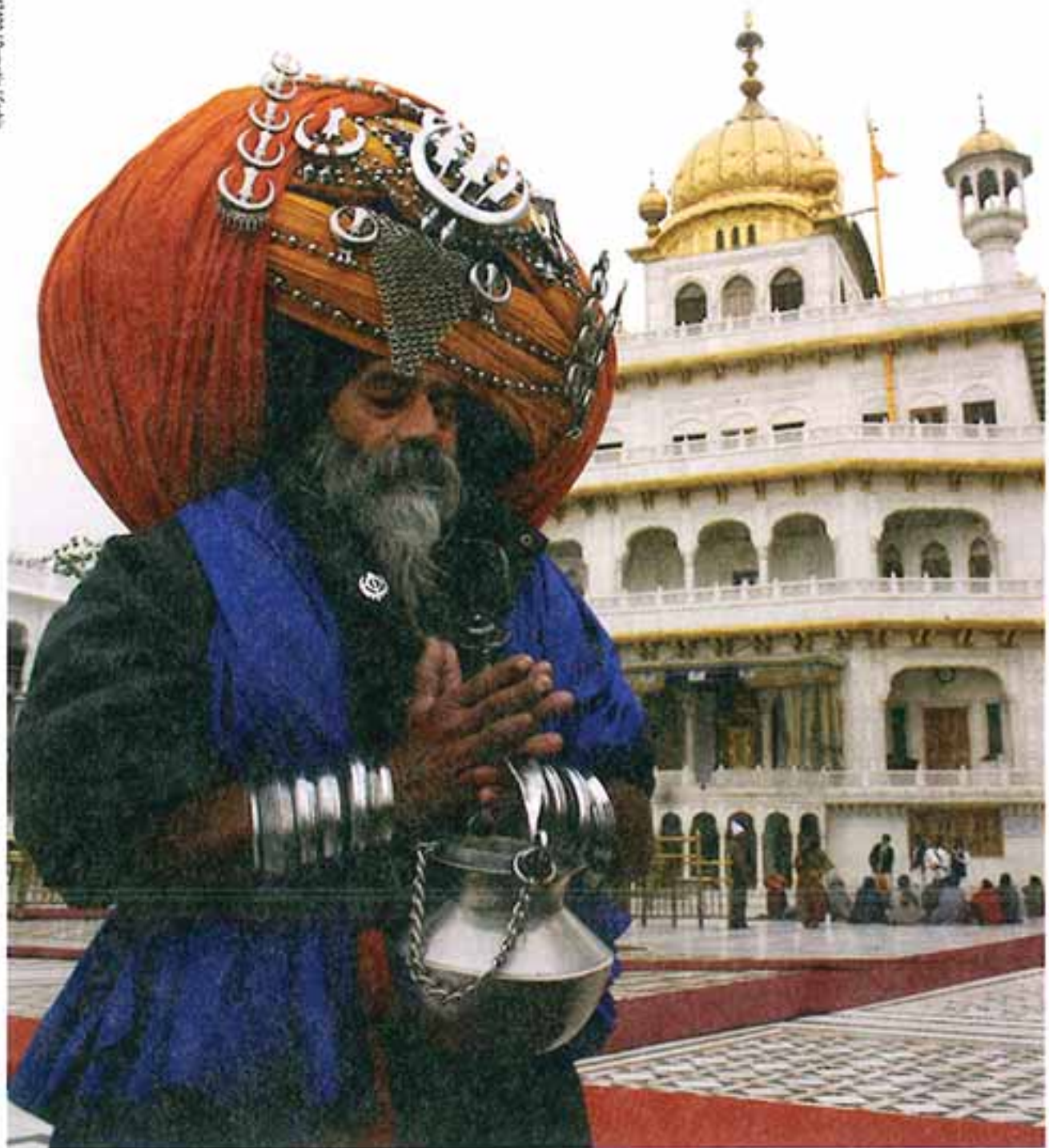
SIKH IDENTITY AND COMMUNITY: WORK, WORSHIP, AND CHARITY

People who have not learned about Sikhism may wonder, Why do Sikh men typically wear turbans and refuse to shave their beards? We can now recognize that as one of the Five Ks, an uncut beard is a sign of membership in the Khalsa, and hence a symbol of Sikh identity. The turban, which is worn by almost every male Sikh in the traditional homeland, India, is another important symbol of Sikh identity. Even in places like the United Kingdom, motorcycle helmet laws have been modified to suit the insistence of Sikhs regarding this custom (although many Western Sikhs choose not to wear the turban).

That the turban causes Sikhs to stand out in the world is no accident, nor is it regretted. Such ease of recognition nurtures social identity and a sense of community, hallmarks of Sikhism. But for such a relatively small religious community to be so easily recognized also makes it vulnerable to being misunderstood by outsiders. Some Sikhs were even mistaken for Muslim militants and became targets of persecution in the aftermath of the attacks on the World Trade Center and Pentagon on 9-11. As people around the world become more familiar with the Sikh community, one can hope that such misunderstanding will end.

The Sikh community does its own part to nurture a positive image and to make itself better known to the world at large. From its beginnings, Sikhism has been on the side of religious freedom and justice for oppressed people. Justice is carried out partly through

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the regular donation of one-tenth of one's income to charitable causes. And though their theology resolves differences between Hinduism and Islam, Sikhs consider the uniqueness, coherence, and effectiveness of their own path to God to be most important.

The three guiding principles of Sikh life are worship, work, and charity. As members of a tradition that effectively nourishes the spirituality of the individual and also nurtures material and social welfare, Sikhs maintain their identity while playing an ever expanding role in the world community.

1. What is the general meaning of the term *guru*?

The Five Ks needed for membership in the Khalsa are uncut hair, a comb, an iron wrist guard, a sword or knife, and a pair of shorts.

CHAPTER REVIEW

2. What is the literal meaning of the word *sikh*?
3. List the three ways the capitalized term *Guru* is used in Sikhism.
4. Briefly describe Nanak's early life.
5. Summarize Nanak's statement upon returning from receiving God's revelation.
6. What is significant about the town founded by Guru Nanak?
7. What is the term for the Sikh community?
8. What is the name of the Sikh scripture? Who compiled it?
9. Who is revered as the greatest Guru after Nanak?
10. What is the Khalsa?
11. Identify Guru Gobind Singh's successor.
12. What makes the Adi Granth Sikhism's "greatest attraction"?
13. What is the name of the summary of Sikh theology that begins the Adi Granth?
14. Explain what it means to say that God is immanent.
15. Why is God referred to as Guru in Sikhism?
16. What is *haumai*?
17. Why is God's creation necessary for Sikh salvation?
18. Describe the state of salvation for Sikhism.
19. Briefly describe the Sikh *gurdwara*.
20. What does the preparing and sharing of food symbolize in Sikhism?
21. Identify the Five Ks.
22. Why is the ritual of initiation into the Khalsa performed by five people?