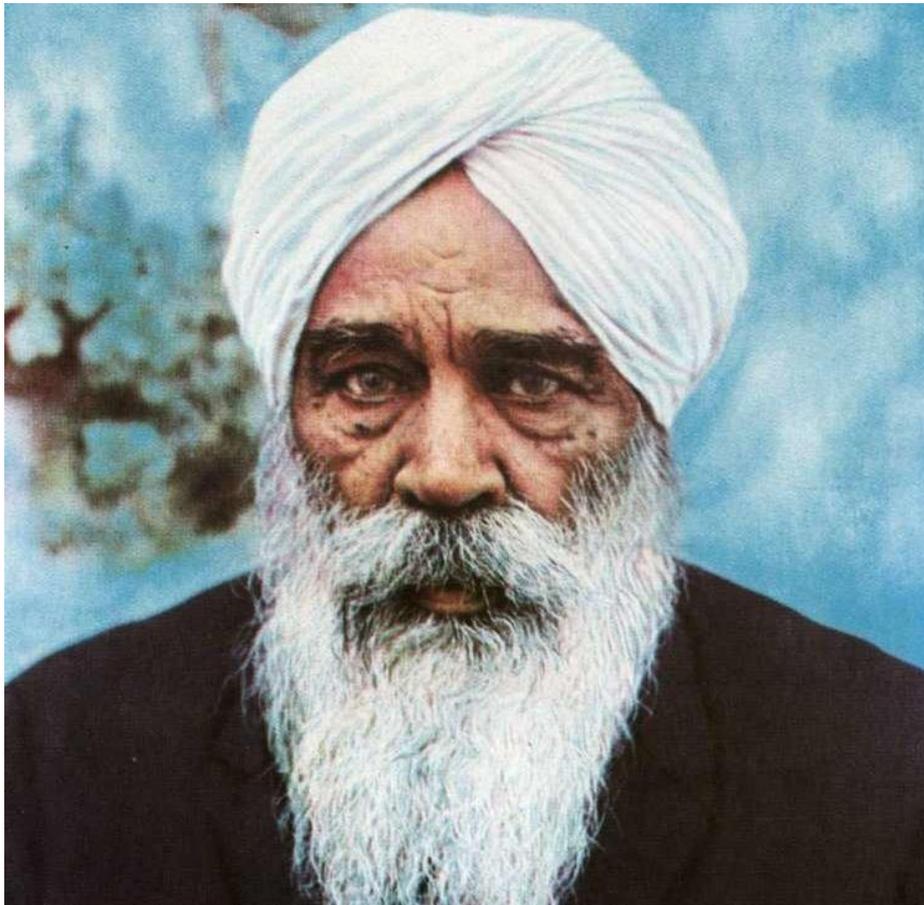


Sikh History and The Origins of the Sikh Religion

by: Giovanni Vines

The Sikhs; who are they? You've seen their distinctive, often colorful turbans and long beards. But what are the origins of the Sikh religion and Sikh history?

There is an ever-increasing number of them migrating away from mother India to Europe, North America, and throughout the entire world. In all, the Sikhs number about twenty-seven million. Most live in India, with about 76% of all Sikhs living in the north Indian state of Punjab.



Alt tag = Sikhs are easy to recognize with their distinct turbans and long beards.

Speaking of turbans, since nine-eleven, Sikhs in the U.S. have been misidentified on many occasions as Islamists. This mistaken identity has resulted, all too often, in Sikhs being assaulted, and even killed by anti-Muslim extremists and bigots.

This mis-identification has occurred because Sikhs, and some Muslims from Iran, Afghanistan, and India, all wear turbans. Anyone living in southern Asia and the Middle East can easily identify the style of a man's turban, and from that they can tell you his religious affiliation and probably his country of origin also.



Alt tag = Asians can easily identify a man's religion and country of origin from the style of his turban.

Sikh History

Mistaking a Sikh for a Muslim is actually ironic, since the Sikh Brotherhood and the Sikh religion, as we know it today, emerged in 1716 as the result of armed conflict between the mostly Hindu populations living in the Punjab, and India's Islamic Mogul rulers.

Mogul rulers had been in place in India for about 300 years. Throughout the seventeenth century, the Hindu majority living in Northern India had suffered increasing violence and abuse at the hands of the Moguls. By 1700, the people had had enough. They organized an army and drove the Moguls out of Northern India, once and for all.



Alt tag = Guru Gobind Singh is revered by the Sikhs for his role in liberating them from Mogul rule.

One of principal organizers of this army was a guru holy man named Gobind. Gobind was the son of another guru holy man named Tegh Bahadur. The moguls insisted that all of the Hindu leaders, including Tegh Bahadur and his disciples, convert to Islam. After refusing to convert, Tegh Bahadur was tortured and killed in 1675 by the Moguls. Then they went after Gobind because they feared he would be out for revenge.

Gobind was forced to flee northern India. But after traveling around the subcontinent for many years recruiting allies and supporters, he ultimately returned to the Punjab, rallied fighters, and went into battle.

At this pivotal moment in Indian history, these fighters needed a way to identify each other, so that they could easily recognize who was loyal to the cause. So, they adopted a specific style of dress, including the distinctive turban, also known as a dastar, and other identifiers known as the five K's;

- Kesh - (uncut hair)
- Kara - (a steel bracelet)
- Kanga - (a wooden comb)
- Kaccha - (cotton underwear)
- Kirpan - (steel sword)

Once the moguls were defeated, the people adopted the surname Singh, meaning 'lion'. This common name helped to further conjoin them into a distinct society of people.

Guru Nanak - The Spiritual Origins of the Sikh Religion

Regrettably, what is all-too-often lost in any discussion of Sikh history is their spiritual origin. Tegh Bahadur and Gobind were the ninth and tenth gurus respectively in a line of spiritual masters that began in 1500 with the mission of a great saint known as Guru Nanak.



Alt tag = Guru Nanak was a wandering minstrel teacher.

Nanak was born in 1469 in northwestern India near Lahore, now a part of Pakistan. He came to the world to fulfill a noble purpose; to unite souls of different backgrounds and faiths, and to inspire them to seek God-realization.

Nanak was born into a Hindu family and caste of merchants. His father was the village accountant. The village elder assured the family that when it came time for Nanak's father to retire, the job would go to Nanak. But while his father groomed him for life as a merchant, Nanak developed his own interests.

From an early age, he investigated the subject of religion with any authority he could find. He sought out ascetics, sadhus, yogis, and religious centers of learning, and as a result, gained a solid footing in scriptural literature and theology.

When Nanak became old enough, his father arranged for various jobs, like shop keeping and horse trading, trying to pave the way for Nanak's ultimate destiny as a householder. But Nanak preferred the company of his religious and ascetic friends and performed poorly in all of his jobs.

Frustrated, and out of favors with his local contacts, Nanak's father arranged for an apprenticeship in a nearby town. He bankrolled his son with enough money to set himself up in business. But along the route to his new post, Nanak met a group of holy men and gave all of his father's money to them.

Upon his return, Nanak's father concluded that he had gone mad and called for a doctor to examine him. Nanak responded with a hymn:

*"Some take me as one under an evil spell
Others say that I am 'out of tune',
Some call me a man forsaken and woebegone;
But I am mad after my Lord
And yearn for none but Him."*

Nanak's brother-in-law, who lived in a nearby town, was sympathetic and arranged for a merchant position for Nanak. By day, Nanak performed his duties as best he could. But his evenings were devoted to meditation.

One morning, after bathing in a nearby stream, Nanak wandered off into the forest. Three days went by and no one knew where he was. Eventually, he emerged from the forest, muttering the phrase, *"There is no Hindu, there is no Muslim"*. Everywhere he went, he chanted the phrase. People really believed he had gone mad.

Later on, in describing the experience in the forest, he explained that he had met the lord and was given certain esoteric instructions, including a mandate to teach. Nanak began writing hymns with spiritual messages and praise for God. After a period of preparation, Nanak began his famous journeys. He enlisted a few local supporters, including his musician friend, Mardana, and they set off.

Nanak took four long journeys, a period which would occupy twenty-five years of his life. His purpose was not to travel to any particular place, but rather to find souls who were hungry after knowledge of

God, wherever he managed to find them. He was a masterful teacher and prolific writer. Nanak's hymns, which are preserved in the Sikh holy book, the Adi Granth, number nearly a thousand.

Nanak was a traveling minstrel. He was a singer/songwriter. He and his band of roving disciples would enter a village or town, looking for a crowd of people somewhere. Then they would begin playing music and Nanak would sing. Halfway through the hymn, he would stop and address the crowd, expounding on the deeper, esoteric meaning contained within the words. After the singing concluded, he gave esoteric initiation instructions to those that remained. Nanak taught spiritual disciplines (sadhanas) that allowed for direct contact with the power of God, or Naam.

Nanak was continually trying to help wean people away from their archaic, ritualistic observances. One day, when Nanak was walking near a river, he observed people throwing baskets of water toward the east, a customary way of relieving the burdens of the ancestors in heaven. Nanak waded in and began throwing water toward the west. When the people asked him why he was throwing water toward the west, he replied that he was watering his fields in Lahore. They asked how such a thing was possible. Nanak replied that if these waters could reach the heavens, then surely they could reach Lahore, which was much closer by comparison.

During Nanak's life, those who earnestly sought a spiritual life usually left their towns and villages behind to live an ascetic life in the jungles and forests. Nanak was concerned to see these sincere souls driven away from mainstream society. He wanted the quest for spiritual awakening to be available to everyone, everywhere, regardless of their religious background or stature within their communities.



Alt tag = When Guru Nanak visited a community of yogis, they invited him to join their order.

When Nanak visited Gorakhmata, a community of yogis, they immediately took to him and asked him to join their order. Nanak replied with the following hymn.

*“Yoga lies not in the yogi’s patched garments,
Not in his ash smeared body, nor walking staff.
Yoga lies not in large earrings, shaved heads,
Nor in the blowing of the conch.
One who lives in the world, uncontaminated,
Has found the secret of yoga.”*

When he visited Multan, a region crowded with faqirs and holy men, he was greeted at the village gate with a bowl brimming over with milk. The intended message was that the place was already awash with holy men and there was no room for another. Nanak placed a jasmine flower on top of the milk and had the bowl returned. His gesture meant that he would float above the fray, giving sweet fragrance to all.

Love of God and service to all was at the core of Nanak’s teachings. He bore witness to the glory of one God, one human brotherhood, and universal love. He reconciled all religious faiths, with a reverence for all the past saints and masters. He proclaimed the harmony inherent in all religious scriptures and traditions; that the same flame of love shined in all of the world’s churches, temples, shrines, and sacraments. Nanak was the manifested heart of religion.

In 1520, Nanak retired from his travels and returned to the Punjab, back to his humble roots to work the land with his family and disciples. Nanak had gained a good bit of renown by this time, and soon seekers and disciples began pouring in from the Middle East, Central Asia, Afghanistan, and the subcontinent.

Prior to his death, he appointed his devoted disciple, Lehna, to succeed him in the spiritual mission. He renamed Lehna ‘Angad’, and instructed him to move across the river and establish a new community in order to help further the spiritual work.

This tradition, of handing the mantle of guru-ship over to a successor, began a tradition, or lineage of successive gurus. Ten generations later, Tegh Bahadur assumed the role as ninth guru, and his son, Gobind, became the tenth. After the defeat of the Moguls, Gobind became Gobind Singh.

The Evolution from Guru to Sikh Religion

Every major world religion, including the Sikh religion, began with living teachers. In some cases, religions evolved as the result of the appearance and ministry of a single teacher. Most religions, including the Sikh religion, however, have evolved from several teachers, or a line of gurus.

When these living teachers were present in the world, they taught directly to people, outside of the framework and support of any organized religious body. Yes, all of them were born into some culture which included a religious identity. But they conducted their spiritual missions independently.

Jesus, for example, was born a Jew, and knew his religious faith’s teachings and scriptures intimately. However, when he ministered to people, even though he made reference to Judaism on occasion as a teaching mechanism, he spoke from his own revelations and knowledge of truth. He was an authority. He was the source of knowledge.

The Sikh religion, like all major world religions, began as a spiritual movement. The focus of these movements is the teacher himself and the content of the teacher's esoteric message. Eventually, however, these groups grow in numbers, with politics and egos being inserted into the group dynamic. Oftentimes, the spiritual development of successive teachers begins to wane, and the esoteric component of the teachings is replaced by theory and dogma. As the light in the group fades, the spiritual movement devolves into a religious body, with emphasis on the texts and theoretical portions of the teachings alone. You can track this devolutionary process in the history, not only of the Sikh religion, but in every major religious institution.

In the case of the Sikh religion, the life and death of Gobind Singh marked the crossroads where a tradition of ten successive spiritual masters became a religious institution. Prior to Gobind's death, the people asked, "What shall we do after you're gone...where shall we turn for spiritual knowledge and guidance?"

Gobind Singh had made no accommodation for naming a successor. So, he answered them, saying; "Go into the Adi Granth and you will find your answers there". The Adi Granth is the sacred scripture of the Sikhs. It contains hymns and writings from each of the ten Sikh gurus, including hymns written by Tegh Bahadur and Gobind Singh.

After Gobind Singh's death, the people concluded that Gobind wanted their scripture, the Adi Granth, to now be the guru. They interpreted his words to mean that there would be no more living teachers in their tradition. Gobind, they believed, was the tenth and last Sikh guru. From that point forward, their holy book, the Adi Granth, became their guru, and a 200-year spiritual movement became the Sikh religion.

Today, the Sikh religion has become a major world religion. The Sikhs are hard-working, industrious people who play a major role in Indian affairs. Many have served in the Indian military over the past 200 years. They are merchants, doctors, farmers, and engineers. Many have held high positions in the Indian government, like Manmohan Singh, who served two terms as Prime Minister of India from 2004 to 2014.

The pure foundation of the Sikh religion is the teachings of Guru Nanak, one of history's greatest spiritual masters. Nanak taught that love of God and service to humanity were prerequisites to spiritual transcendence.

"His devotees praise Him, yet never attain full knowledge of the Infinite;

Like streams tumbling into the ocean, they know not the depths therein.

Even kings and emperors with heaps of wealth and vast dominion,

Compare not to an ant, filled with the love of God."