

# Sikhism 101 Overview



by Imran Daniel

## HISTORY and BELIEFS

The global Sikh population ranges from eighteen million to twenty-six million followers.<sup>1</sup> In 2001, Census Canada reported that there were 278,410 Sikhs in Canada, with approximately half (135,310) living in British Columbia.<sup>2</sup> Participation in the marketplace and community in the Fraser Valley includes engagement with Sikhs.

Sikhism stems from the teachings of Nanak, who would become the first of ten Sikh gurus. Nanak began his teaching in India in the late 1400s and early 1500s. Sikhism arose in a social and religious context heavily influenced by the Hindu and Islamic worldviews, and around the same time as the Renaissance in Europe and the Reformation of the Church.<sup>3</sup> All ten of the Sikh gurus are honored as great teachers and leaders but are not worshiped as gods.

The writings of the gurus were preserved and compiled in the form of a book, the *Granth Sahib*. Guru Gobind Singh, whom was the tenth and final personal guru, instituted the *Granth Sahib* as an authoritative holy book and a lasting guru. Nikky Guninder Kaur-Singh, in addressing the role of the *Guru Granth Sahib*, says that, “Sikhs turn to this holy book for inspiration and guidance in ritual and worship, and they treat it with the highest respect.”<sup>4</sup>

Gurinder Singh Mann, when discussing the central tenet of Sikhism, says it is, “centered on Vahiguru (the wonderful Sovereign, the most frequently used epithet for God), who is the creator and the sustainer of the world. In this status, Vahiguru is fundamentally different from the creation and is beyond gender and other human distinctions.”<sup>5</sup> The Sikh view of humanity teaches that all humans are equal before Vahiguru regardless of gender, ethnicity, or caste. Furthermore, humans are supposed to work hard to provide for themselves and to contribute to the good of the community, they ought to strive to understand Vahiguru properly, and they are to refrain from any intoxicants such as alcohol, tobacco, and drugs.<sup>6</sup> Gurinder Singh Mann says, “according to Sikh belief, a spiritual journey begins with a clear recognition of the nature of Vahiguru and the world.”<sup>7</sup> Furthermore, author Kamala Elizabeth Nayar asserts that, “the Sikh world view posits the cycle of birth, death, and rebirth (*sansar*) and sets the goal of religion as to liberate its followers from this cycle (*mukti*) so that they merge with the Ultimate.”<sup>8</sup> Nikky-

<sup>1</sup> Woods, Len. *Handbook of World Religions: A Bible-Based Review of 50 World Faiths*. Uhrichsville, Ohio: Barbour Pub, 2008.

<sup>2</sup> “Population by Religion, by Province and Territory (2001 Census) (Alberta, British Columbia, Yukon),” Government of Canada, Statistics Canada, section goes here, accessed March 09, 2013, <http://www.statcan.gc.ca/tables-tableaux/sum-som/101/cst01/demo30c-eng.htm>.

<sup>3</sup> Nikky-Guninder Kaur. Singh, *Sikhism (World Religions)*. (New York: Facts on File, 1993), 12.

<sup>4</sup> Nikky-Guninder Kaur. Singh, *Sikhism: An Introduction* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2011), 9.

<sup>5</sup> Gurinder Singh. Mann, *Sikhism* (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 2004), 15.

<sup>6</sup> World Sikh Organization of Canada | Promoting and Protecting the Interests of the Sikh Diaspora, Core Sikh Beliefs, accessed March 05, 2013, <http://www.worldsikh.ca/>.

<sup>7</sup> Gurinder Singh. Mann, *Sikhism* (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 2004), 81.

<sup>8</sup> Kamala E. Nayar, *The Sikh Diaspora in Vancouver: Three Generations amid Tradition, Modernity, and Multiculturalism* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2004), 124.

Guninder Kaur Singh describes the importance of hard work as, “good deeds that earn merit towards a better next life. Sikhs do not look down on any kind of work. They find laziness or living off others unacceptable.”<sup>9</sup>

Historically, the Sikhs have been a persecuted group. Kaur Singh mentions that, “early in their history the Sikhs were forced by religious persecution and by the execution of two of their gurus by Muslim rulers, to arm themselves for protection.”<sup>10</sup> Thus, Guru Gobind Singh, in 1699, organized an elite fighting force known as the *Khalsa*, for those committed to, and willing to protect, the Sikh faith and community. Many Sikh theologians, including Kaur Singh, maintain that, “despite the image of militancy that has followed them, the Sikhs’ message is one of universal love and peace.”<sup>11</sup>

Committed and initiated Sikhs are members of the *Khalsa* and are distinguished by five signs, known as the “Five K’s”: *Kesh* – unshorn hair and beard symbolizing reverence of Vahiguru and his creation; *Kanga* – a wooden comb symbolizing orderliness and self-discipline; *Kara* – an iron or steel bracelet symbolizing the oneness and eternity of God; *Kachera* – cotton underwear, like boxer shorts, that symbolize the expected high moral character, fidelity, and restraint; and *Kirpan* – a small sword symbolizing the personal responsibility to protect the weak and uphold justice.<sup>12</sup>

## ARTICULATING THE GOSPEL MESSAGE THROUGH FRIENDSHIP

Christians ought to pursue genuine relationships with Sikhs of all generations because relationships will be the primary context in which good Christian mission with the Sikh community will occur. Christians and Sikhs share a desire to better the community, therefore participating in community events and activities would be a great first step in developing genuine relationships.

One of the keys to build a trustworthy friendship with someone is to *not* start with what we do or what we believe. If we want to reach out to people from another cultural group we need to get to know them, which requires that we ask them lots of questions. We need to find out what they do, what brought them to this country, and what they believe. We should never assume that we *know* what people believe before we ask them.

<sup>9</sup> Nikky-Guninder Kaur. Singh, *Sikhism (World Religions)*. (New York: Facts on File, 1993), 10.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 13.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 14.

<sup>12</sup> World Sikh Organization of Canada | Promoting and Protecting the Interests of the Sikh Diaspora, Articles of Faith, accessed March 05, 2013, <http://www.worldsikh.ca/>.

It is also important to greet them in their own traditional greetings. For example if you are greeting a Punjabi person, say "Sat Sri Akal Ji". Often when I meet someone from a different ethnic background I greet them in their local language. The response is usually a big smile and a question like, "How do you know my language?" or, "Have you been to my country?" If you choose to visit their temple, follow their instructions (except bowing down before the book or any sort of worship) and be a good guest. In other words, in order to build a meaningful relationship you need to show an interest in their lives. One of the most common ways to connect with other people is over *food*. Most Canadians love butter chicken, and most Punjabi people love to be hospitable and make food for people. Why not ask your Indian friend to teach you how to make butter chicken? Here are few other practical tips:

1. One of the most important things to remember is that when you invite a Punjabi friend over for a coffee or dinner, do not expect them to leave in an hour. In general when you are meeting them, make sure not to schedule something else afterwards for at least two hours. Also, if you are inviting them over for a meal, do not serve beef or pork. Most of the Sikh people are vegetarian (which typically means no eggs either), but some people will eat chicken. It is always best to ask if they are vegetarian or non-vegetarian.
2. Invite your Punjabi friend over to your house and make him/her some Indian chai or buy some samosas. Serve them their traditional local food if possible.
3. You can ask them to come to your house to teach you how to make chai or roti (naan bread).
4. Use the language they are familiar with. Someone once said to me, "I asked a Sikh person a question about Sikhism but he couldn't answer it." "Were you using a vocabulary that he was not familiar with?" I asked. He replied, "I guess so." You may know more about Sikhism than your Sikh friend and it will never lead you anywhere but if you meet them where they are at, you will have a meaningful conversation. Again, Apostle Paul, when he went to Athens, found a common ground and started with:

*"Men of Athens, I perceive that in every way you are very religious. For as I passed along and observed the objects of your worship, I found also an altar with this inscription, 'To the unknown god.' What therefore you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you."* Acts 17:22-23 ESV

Contextualizing the gospel into another culture can be a challenge, but it doesn't have to be. We need to find some common interests to connect to the people from other ethnicities just like Paul

did. Someone once said to me that, “I want to connect with Punjabi people but their food stinks.” It will be impossible to reach out to someone with the Gospel message with that kind of attitude. As Christians our lives are transformed by the Gospel message and we are commanded to take the Gospel to every nation and tribe (Matthew 28:19-20). God has brought the Sikh population right to our doorstep. We need to stop being ethnocentric and proclaim the power of the Cross to people of *all* nations.

Furthermore, it is time that we tell our stories as a part of our Gospel conversation. We all have stories of what God has done in our lives, don't we? Lets share our stories with Sikh friends rather than just launch into a prepared Gospel presentation or monologue. In our Western culture we like to have a logical answer to every question, whereas in the east, people relate to stories more than logical arguments. In the Punjab region of India and Pakistan, whenever there is a power outage (especially in the evening), the whole family comes together and they tell each other stories and riddles to pass time while waiting for the electricity to come back. We need to tell God's story boldly, but we also need to tell our story.

## **A Common Question**

One question that is asked often by Canadian Christians is, “Do the Punjabi people want to be friends with Canadian people?” The answer is yes. Often people say, “they always hang out with their community, why is that?” First, Indian people are very community oriented. Second, half of the first generation (or new comers to Canada) don't know English very well and sometimes they want to talk to their Canadian neighbors but they don't because they cannot carry the conversation and their Canadian friends speak so fast that they don't understand them.

Christians and Sikhs will continue to coexist for years to come in the Fraser Valley. The Sikh community's history is one of resilience, their current circumstance is complex, and the future of their faith in Canada is unknown. If evangelical Christians desire to engage in Christian mission to Sikhs in the Fraser Valley they must understand the tenets of historic Sikhism, be aware of modernity's influence on the intergenerational Sikh community, and prayerfully engage in relational, strategic, and explicit Gospel proclamation. In His providence, God has brought the Sikhs to the Fraser Valley and now Christians and churches must take seriously the commission to make disciples of all nations – for their neighbor's good and God's glory. To help you connect with your Punjabi neighbours, friends and co-workers, learn the following Punjabi phrases that will be helpful for you to connect with Punjabi speakers.

## BASIC PUNJABI PHRASES

PHRASE IN PUJABI	MEANING IN ENGLISH
Sat Sri Akaal ji	Hello / Greetings
Ji aaya nu	Welcome
Haan ji	Yes
Nahi	No
Ki haal aya ji?	How are you?
Theek Thaak.	Fine
Vadiya ji.	Good.
Veer ji / Paji /	Brother
Meharbani	Fine Thank you
Tuhaada ki naa hai?	What is your name?
Mera naa _____ hai.	My name is _____.
Tuhanu mil ke khushi hoi.	Pleased to meet you.
Maf Karna	Excuse Me
Kirpa karke	Please
Eh changga hai / Eh theek hai.	That's fine.
Koi gal nahi.	You're welcome / doesn't matter / no worries
Ki tusi angrezi bolde hoi?	Do you speak English?
Mai Punjabi nahi bolda.	I don't speak Punjabi.
Mai thorhi Panjabi bolda ham.	I speak only a little Punjabi.
Tusi samajhde ho na?	Do you understand?
Mai samajha nahi.	I don't understand.
Mai nahi janda.	I dont know.
Mainu maaf karna, tusi ki kiha?	Pardon / I'm sorry, what did you say?
Mainu maaf karna.	I'm sorry.
Madi Punjabi karke maaf karna ji.	Please forgive me for my poor Punjabi.
Kirpa karke hauli-hauli bolo.	Please speak slowly.
Usda ki arth hai	What does that mean?

Ki keemat hai?	What is the price?
Ki samay ho giya hai?	What time is it?
Ki tusi is nu dobara ucar sakde ho?	Can you repeat that please?
Panjabi 'ch _____ kidda kandey ho?	How do you say _____ in Punjabi?
Tusi kithon ho	Where are you from?
Mai _____ ton haan.	I'm from _____.
Ikk hi pasha jaan ke nahi sarda.	One language is never enough.
Bhot-bhot badhayi!	Congratulations!.
Alvida!	Goodbye!
Mai ta mazaak kar reha see.	I was kidding.
Hun appa chalde haa.	Okay, I'm leaving now.
Mai Punjabi sikhna chaunda haan.	I want to learn Punjabi.
Mainu _____ pasand nahi.	I don't like _____.
Ikk gall dasso.	Tell me one thing.
Pehle aap / Tuhade baad	After you.
Changa fer milange! / Fer milde haan.	See you!