

REL 402 - Sikhism

Sikhism

India is the birthplace of many religions, for example Hinduism and Jainism, and it also happens to be the birthplace of a little known religion called Sikhism. Sikhism was founded by Guru Nanak Dev (1469-1539) in the Northern Indian district of Punjab in the 15th to 16th century. "When Nanak was thirty, his life was transformed after immersion in a river, from which it is said he did not emerge for three days" (Fisher 2010). Some people believe that Nanak was on the other side of the river meditating while others believe he visited God, who gave him (Nanak) a bowl of milk and sent him back to rid the world of Kali Yuga (the darkest of ages). There is no evidence of his whereabouts, except that he suddenly appeared in town three days after his disappearance in the river, looking radiant and teaching a different religion. Most Indians are Hindus, Muslims or Buddhist with a small number of the Indian population (about 2%) being Sikhs. BBC Religion records the population of Sikhs in the world as 20 million with most of them living in the Punjab district of India.

Influence

Guru Nanak was born at a time when Hinduism and Islam were dominant in the Punjab district. He was bothered by some of the Indian customs that belittled Indians of certain social status or gender. These customs had become part of the Indian religious and social life and were upheld by religious leaders. Examples of such customs were the caste system and Sati (burning of the widow). Guru Nanak chose a mix of Hindu and Islamic customs that he believed was good for the Sikhs and adopted them as part of the Sikh doctrine. The rest he abolished. For example, he did not believe in the Hindu tradition of throwing sacred water towards the rising sun as a sign of worshipping one's ancestors, or the Muslim tradition of not setting one's feet towards the Kabah because God is there. He actually made fun of these traditions by defying them. Among the many traditions he adopted from these two religions, he adopted the belief in the existence of one Omnipotent and Omnipresent God from the Islamic religion and the belief of karma and reincarnation from the Hindu religion.

Leadership

Sikhs are led by a guru, a term from the Sanskrit meaning teacher or mentor. The first guru was Guru Nanak, the founder of Sikhism. Before his death, he appointed Guru Angad as his successor, so it became a Sikh tradition for each Guru to appoint his successor. Guru Angad appointed Guru Amar Das, who appointed Guru Ram Das, who also appointed Guru Arjan as the fifth guru. During the leadership of Guru Arjan (1563-1601), he discovered that forgeries of writings of his and his predecessors conveying the wrong message were being circulated. "The Fifth Guru compiled the sacred scriptures of the Sikhs, the Adi Granth (original holy book), from devotional hymns composed by Guru Nanak, the other gurus, and Hindu and Muslim saints, including Kabir and many spiritual figures of low caste (Fisher 2010)." He completed the compilation of the "original holy book in 1604. The next three gurus after Guru Arjan did not include any writings to the sacred book, but the ninth, Guru Bahadur, and tenth, Guru Gobind Singh did. There are only ten human gurus in the Sikh religion. The tenth guru did not appoint a human successor, but he appointed the sacred book, Guru Granth Sahib, as his successor.

Sikh Scriptures

From 1708 to this day, Guru Granth Sahib has been considered the guru of the Sikhs. With a total of 1,430 pages, the Guru Granth Sahib is the main and holiest scripture of the Sikhs and it is written in Gurumukhi script. As mentioned in the previous paragraph, the Guru Granth Sahib is a compilation of writings of the gurus (in order of appointment) and Hindu and Muslim saints. According to BBC Religion, the Guru Granth Sahib is the only known scripture in the world which was compiled while its compiler was still alive. Take the Bible for instance, it was compiled 60 years after the death of Christ, the Koran compiled 80 years after the death of Mohammad, and Three baskets and Angas, 40 years after the death of Buddha and Mahavir. The Sikhs have other writings and books written by their gurus to guide them in life. Examples of some of them are Dasam Granth, Sarab Loh Granth, Varan Bhai Gurdas, Amarnama, Ani Rai, Babar Vani, Pothi, Karni Namah, Nasihat Namah, etc.

Martyrdom

Ironically, Sikhs have been plagued by a lot of violence and martyrdom after Adi Granth (the original holy book) was compiled. The Adi Granth was compiled during the time that the Punjab region was under Moghul rule. Shortly after the Fifth Guru compiled the Adi Granth, he was falsely accused of treason by Muslim fanatics led by the Islamic Mughal emperor, Jahangir. Different authors have different versions. "According to this version, the zealous Islamic Mughal emperor Jahangir (r. 1605-27 C.E), distressed at the popularity of the fifth guru and the rapid growth of his community of "infidels", had long cherished a desire to rid his empire of this pretentious holy man" (Fenech 1997). It is believed that Guru Arjin was tortured and even made to sit upon a red-hot iron plate while hot white sand was poured over his body. "To the chagrin of his gaolers, GuruArjin bore this punishment with an extraordinary steadfastness and bravery – made all the more impressive by his recital of hymns while undergoing the ordeal" (Fenech 1997). He died in a display of heroism that Sikhs are proud of, and it is the first known martyrdom of the Sikh religion. Another martyr worth mentioning is Guru Bahadur (1621-1675), the ninth guru, because it is believed that its event is what led to the creation of the Khalsa (which

will be discussed next). According to BBC Religion, Guru Bahadur was accused by Aurangzeb, another emperor and Muslim fanatic whose reign was plagued with higher taxes imposed on non-Muslims, demolishing of religious sites that were not mosques, and the forced conformity to Islam or facing execution. Guru Bahadur was executed in 1675 in Delhi for being outspoken against Aurangzeb's actions, and refusing to convert to Islam.

Baptism Ceremony

The tenth guru and son of the ninth guru, Guru Gobind Singh (1666-1708) decided to make the Sikhs a community of fighters to protect themselves and the helpless of other religions from (Muslim) persecution. On April 13, 1699, on the day of Baisakhi, which also marks the festival of the ripening of the Rabi harvest, the Khalsa was founded by Guru Gobind Singh in Anandpur in the Punjab region. During the Baisakhi festivity, with a sword in hand, Guru Gobind Singh asked the people to come and sacrifice their lives for the good of Sikhism. Only five men came forward. The guru took each man (one by one) into a tent and returned alone with a bloodied sword to the horror of the crowd of eighty thousand. No one else would step forward after several calls. The guru then went back into the tent, returned with the five men now wearing saffron-colored garments, and blessed the men with the sacred nectar of immortality (batasha mixed in water) called amrita. The five men drank first, followed by the guru and then the crowd. Guru Gobind Singh gave the men the title Panch Pyare meaning the Beloved Ones, and gave the baptized men in the crowd, the name Singh (meaning lion), and the women, the name Kaur (meaning princess). Thus began the tradition of baptism into Sikhism accompanied by the adoption of the surname Singh or Kaur. For Sikhs to be able to easily recognize each other, the guru introduced the 5 Ks. "They are: kesh (uncut hair), kara (a steel bracelet), Kanga (a wooden comb), kaccha (cotton underwear) and Kirpan (steel sword)" (Chilana 2005).

Festivals and Marriage

Sikhs also celebrate other festivals known as Gurpurbs with an akhand path, which is the complete reading of the Guru Granth Sahib, singing of hymns, lectures and poem recitations. The most important Gurpurbs are associated with the birthday of Guru Nanak, the birthday of Guru Gobind Singh, the martyrdom of Guru Arjan and the martyrdom of Guru Bahadur. These festivities usually take place in decorated Gurdwaras.

The most famous Gurdwara is the Harimandir or the Golden Temple built in 1577. Visitors must remove their shoes and cover their hair before entering a Gurdwara. Free meals or langar are served during certain occasions as part of the religious service, with Karah Parasaad, a special dish served. Langar is free and open to all without any regard to one's class, color or ethnicity.

Sikh marriage rite is called Anand Karaj, and it has been in existence since the days of the Sikh gurus. The marriage ceremony usually takes place in the morning, at the Gurdwara, in the presence of the Guru Granth Sahib. The Hindu type of marriage (which involves caste) is forbidden. Marriages or weddings take place at the home of the bride or at a Gurdwara with all those present sitting on the floor and facing the Guru Granth Sahib. The bride's father hands one end of a scarf to the bride and the other end to the groom, and then the couple walk around the sacred book four times, each time touching their foreheads to the ground. Performing this together signifies equality and their acceptance of each other. There is also singing, teaching and advising.

Sikhs forbid child marriage and polygamy, but are open to widows and widowers remarrying.

Beliefs, Ethics and Lifestyle

Sikhs believe in one omnipotent and omnipresent God, to whom everyone has direct access, and before whom everyone is equal. They believe God has no gender and is without form. They believe in Karma and preach that one should accept karma and its sufferings in good faith and make the best out of it. They also believe in reincarnation. Sikhs believe that life begins at conception and forbid abortion. They believe the timing of birth and death is part of God's plan, and see suicide and abortion as interruptions of God's plans.

On the subject of war, Sikhs believe it must always be the last resort and the motive for it must not be revenge. During war, mercenaries should not be hired, civilians must not be harmed, there must not be looting or destroying of property, cease-fires must be honored and the force used should be just enough for success. "Teachings in the Guru Granth Sahib direct Sikhs to believe in universal brotherhood and the oneness of humanity, and to work for the welfare of everyone irrespective of race, religion, nationality, or social status" (Chilana 2005).

Sikhs forbid the use alcohol, smoking and drugs. They believe in earning an honest living and sharing their wealth willingly with the needy.

Sikhs have had their own unique appearance since the Khalsa. They have long hair gathered in colorful turbans, a long beard, carry a sword or dagger, and have a steel bracelet on their right wrist. They always carry the 5 K's. Many Sikhs currently serve in the Indian army and police, I believe due to the sense of duty to protect the helpless instilled in them since the Khalsa.

Unlike other religions, Sikhs do not have a day set aside for worship, but I noticed that the Sikhs in Albuquerque worship on Sunday mornings, Sunday nights and Wednesday nights. They do not have a Sabbath day. They can worship everyday if they choose to. Worship which is usually in the form of prayer, singing of hymns, meditation and reading of the

scriptures takes place in the mornings and evenings, either individually or communally, at home or at a gurdwara. Due to scheduling, most Sikhs worship at the gurdwara on Sundays.

Sikhs do not fast, go on pilgrimages, nor lead a life of seclusion.

Sikhs can eat anything except meat prepared as a ritual slaughter (kutha). In the gurdwara, during festivities, only vegetarian food is served.

Conclusion

I first became aware of Sikhs in 1984, when Prime Minister Gandhi was assassinated by two of her bodyguards in retaliation to Indian troops storming the Golden Temple and starting a chain of Anti-Sikh riots which killed 3000 innocent Sikhs. I remember being amazed by the unique appearance of the assassins, and even thinking that it was a military requirement to dress and look like the Sikhs do. In this class, I have learned that Sikhism is a peaceful religion, but I have also noticed that calamity always seems to befall them. In 1919, the British Indian army led by Brigadier-General Dyer fired on unarmed innocent Sikh worshippers who had (according to the British, illegally) gathered at the Golden Temple to worship, killing 400 and wounding 1200. "Since the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks, Sikhs have been the targets of racial profiling and discrimination" (Chilana 2005).

The most recent attack on Sikhs happened in Oak Creek, Wisconsin, in August, 2012, when a gunman went to the Gurdwara and killed six people. Chilana believes this is happening because of the lack of awareness of Sikhism in USA. We as Americans assume that anyone wearing a turban is a Muslim (terrorist), because that is what we have been led to assume by watching movies. I believe with some media coverage, the world can see Sikhism for what it stands for and appreciate it.

Two relevant websites for information about Sikhs are www.sikhs.org/ and www.bbc.co.uk/religion/religions/sikhism/.

A central part of the Sikh practice is the promotion of equality among all mankind regardless of their race, class, ethnicity, and background, and the rejection of the Hindu caste system and other systems that control, take advantage, suppress and humiliate others, such as slavery. I end this paper with some Sikh commands;

- keep God in heart and mind at all times
- live honestly and work hard
- treat everyone equally
- be generous to the less fortunate
- serve others

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