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Sikhism



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Brief Overview

Sikh is a Punjabi word meaning disciple. Sikhism arose in the Punjab region of the Indian subcontinent, an area which today straddles the border of Pakistan and India. Growing out of a diverse religious context, including the sant tradition and the Bhakti reform movement, Sikhism is often regarded as the fifth largest religion in the world, with approximately 25 million Sikhs worldwide. Sikhism was founded by Nanak (born around 1469). Though at times considered a Hindu sect, the majority of Sikhs and scholars, while acknowledging the Hindu roots, view Sikhism as a separate independent religious system.

Sikhism espouses a form of monotheism while rejecting the dualism often found in Hindu thought. However, pantheistic and monistic elements are retained. The soul goes through cycles of births and deaths before it reaches human form, with the goal of life to live virtuously so the soul may merge with god. This emphasis on a virtuous life gives Sikhism elements of a virtue-based ethic system which is important for both religious and psychological study as it impacts both the

intellectual understanding of the religion and its application. The Sikh scriptures (Adith Granth or Guru Granth Sahib) are soteriological in nature, focused on helping the follower understand the nature and reality of god to facilitate the merger. The Sikh scriptures play a significant role in the ritual and belief of the religion.

Brief Early History

Nanak, a freethinking musician and poet, traveled and taught at the close of the fifteenth century. His following grew into a religious community as he called for people of all faiths to recognize the one divine known by all people but by various names. Nanak focused his teaching on compassion, peace, love, and hard work.

After the death of Nanak, a series of 10 gurus led the egalitarian-minded religious community. In 1606, the gruesome martyrdom of Arjan Dev, the fifth guru, changed the course of Sikhism. What had primarily been a peaceful religious community was thrust into a political and military role.

After a century of political and military struggle, the tenth and final guru, Gobind Singh, installed the Adith Granth, the Sikh scripture, as the final eternal living guru or Guru Granth Sahib. Gobind Singh also created a new Sikh order, the Khalsa, in 1699. The Khalsa are baptized Sikhs typically identified by their commitment to the five Ks: kesh (uncut hair/beard), kanga

(wooden comb), kara (metal bracelet), kachera (type of undergarment), and kirpan (dagger). The elements involved in the ceremony to become a baptized Sikh are very experiential.

Sikhism and Psychology

The identity of a Sikh is an incredibly important element of their psychological makeup. First, Sikhs have no true homeland. The Punjab region rests on the border of Pakistan and India. Second, Sikhism is a world-affirming religion with a focus on hard work and providing its members with significant honor. Sikhs value hard work, and this has led to a large Sikh diaspora as Sikhs have always traveled outside the Punjab region for work and trade.

External Identifiers of Sikhism and Their Relationship to Behavior and Beliefs

One of the greatest issues in Sikh identity is the external identifiers of a Sikh. The most visible is the turban and beard of many male Sikhs. The Khalsa vows to always bear the external identifiers of the Sikh religion, a direct application of their beliefs. In Western countries, Sikhs are often misunderstood by outsiders and have been mistaken for Muslims which has led to attacks upon their communities. Many diasporic Sikhs choose to shave their beard and forgo wearing a turban to accommodate the local culture or to avoid discrimination. For some Sikhs, both in the Punjab and in the diasporic communities, shunning the external identifiers is akin to apostasy. Others see the external identifiers as secondary to the internal religious elements and abandon them to fit into the new culture. It is unknown exactly how much the external pressures of the misunderstanding of Sikhism have caused the external identifiers to be viewed as secondary. As the Sikh diaspora continues to struggle with the role of external identifiers in the Sikh religion, there is no doubt the issue has impacted the psychological makeup of many Sikhs.

Struggle and Its Impact

A history of the Sikh religion includes the persistent struggle of the group. From the martyr of Arjan Dev, many Sikhs see their history as a tale of struggle. Included in this struggle is the feeling of being deceived by the British Raj, feeling betrayed by the failure to establish a homeland in the partition of India, being labeled as terrorists, and discrimination in the diaspora. Each of these events has left an indelible imprint on the Sikhs who have lived through them. The struggle of the Sikh people as a whole often fuels their drive to be successful while also becoming the lens through which many Sikhs view difficulty. Some believe the years of struggle have indelibly impacted the psyche of the Sikh community and at times have led to a drive for vengeance.

Open, But Somewhat Closed Diasporic Communities and Social Support

While the Sikh religion respects all people and outsiders are welcome at gurdwaras and for the langar meal, in many ways, Sikhism functions as a closed group. This allows the gurdwara to occupy the place of social support for the Sikh community, improving the quality of life for the community and mitigating the quantity of stress for first- and second-generation immigrants. Diasporic services are typically not conducted in the local language, and Sikhs do not actively seek to convert others to their beliefs. Furthermore, some Sikhs will not eat with non-Sikhs, and many choose to socialize primarily with others from the Sikh community. This social bubble is not atypical of diasporic religions, especially in the first two generations. However, the somewhat closed function of the community often begins to impact and can prove to be a stressor on the religious identity of those in the following generations.

See Also

Dualism
Monotheism

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