

The Roots of Sikhism: A School Assignment in California

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Sikhism, the fifth largest religion in the world, was founded during the fifteenth century in Punjab, India by a man named Baba Nanak, who would later be called Guru Nanak. The environment in which Guru Nanak was born was a time of widespread havoc and religious violence caused by Islamic rulers who strived to convert India into another Muslim country as they had with Arabia, Iraq, and Turkey to name a few. These Muslims had attempted in vain, though they did manage to convert a number of people, because the inhabitants of the country who were largely Hindu, reverted back to practicing their own religion. The following one religion in public but practicing another in private indicated that falsehood had taken the place of religion (Singh 29). The people of India needed a system of thought in which they could find a sense of religious liberty, social equality, and brotherhood for all (Gupta 73), thus setting the mindset needed for the acceptance of the message of Guru Nanak. The principles presented in Sikhism both encompass and reject some of the main beliefs of Hinduism and Islam in order to create a religion that transcends the limitations of both.

Muslim and Sikh ideas were very similar such that the main beliefs of Sikhism are derived from Islam. The number one and probably most important aspect of both Islam and Sikhism was that they are monotheistic and believe in giving absolute submission to the will of God. Muslims, according to the Koran, believed that God was commanding, forbidding, rewarding, and punishing (Williams 92). These definitions gave a human-like quality to God unlike the words used to glorify God through a Sikh's eyes: fearless, hate-less, omnipresent, and neither created nor destroyed. The monotheistic beliefs of Islam and Sikhism were coupled with their shared requirement of meditation. Muslims repeated *Allah*, while Sikhs recited *Waheguru*. In Sikhism, this essential part of life, which was called *naam japo*, was normally stated along with *kirat karo*, meaning work hard, and *wand chhako*, or share earnings with the poor and less fortunate. The principle of *kirat karo* encompassed the ideal of honesty and therefore can be compared to the Islamic obligation of acting righteously and discouraging others from acting immorally. Yet, Sikhism, did not always agree with what Muslims believed was moral.

Sikhism strongly disagreed with Muslims' treatment of women as well as their use of *jihad*. One aspect of Islam which Muslims accepted as moral was *jihad*, or holy war. Muslims interpreted their rights to *jihad* as launching campaigns of violence and treachery upon resistant peoples in order to convert them to Islam. This was what was taking place during the life of Guru Nanak, so his observation of this brutality led Sikhism to not having forced conversions or a sense of superiority. Another idea that Guru Nanak stressed was his belief in equality for not only men, but women as well. Muslims, though they did have a sense of being one's brother's keeper (Williams 124), did not include women in this equation, but rather literally, only their brothers. For the most part, to many Indians of the time, Muslims presented a very valid way of living life, and therefore greatly influenced the blossoming of Sikhism along with Hinduism.

Hinduism, though it did contain a few appealing aspects, largely influenced Sikhism by exhibiting ideals which Guru Nanak did not want to encompass into his belief system. Probably the only ideal that Sikhism and Hinduism agreed upon was their belief in karma, the accumulation of good deeds. Sikhs believed in this in order to get closer to God. Hindus,

on the other hand believed that karma would help them ascend the ranks of the caste system after reincarnations, and would eventually lead them to release from the cycle of life. This superficial caste system was rejected by Guru Nanak along with the inferior status of women, and replaced by equality for all. Another major difference between Sikhism and Hinduism was that Sikhism was monotheistic while Hinduism was polytheistic. A cause for the rejection of polytheism might have had something to do with how Hindus worship their gods, with idols who were believed to be the god himself or herself. Guru Nanak believed that idols should only represent the gods, not *be* the gods. This belief was later instituted with the Sri Guru Granth Sahib, which contains the wisdom, ideology and philosophy of the Sikh faith, because these scriptures were meant to only represent God, not to be worshiped as God, for God is indescribable. Guru Nanak rejected this idolatry along with the various Vedic rituals and occasional asceticism of Hinduism for they were merely physical aspects of life.

Instead, Guru Nanak believed that meditation, also practiced in Hinduism, was the key to becoming one with God. Sikhs repeated the name *Waheguru*, both physically with their mouths and spiritually in their minds. The idea was to ingrain *Waheguru*, or God, into the mind so intensely, that it would always be reverberating inside the head, adding God to every aspect of daily life. Hindus on the other hand, recited ancient sacred hymns as well as practiced yoga, for it was believed to strengthen the impact of meditating (Renou, 33). Yet, in order to read these sacred hymns, they needed to be literate in a language they did not know. A final ideal of Hinduism that could be looked down upon during fifteenth century was that the scriptures were written in Sanskrit, a language that could only be read by the Brahmins, or priests, not the common people therefore making Hinduism a religion of the fortunate who were literate. Another problem was stated by Dr. S. Radhakrishnan, "The Hindu leader neglected to teach the spiritual realities to the people at large who were sunk in superstitions and materialism" (sikhpoint.com). The Brahmins kept their religious knowledge to themselves and left their people vulnerable to outside influences. Guru Nanak disagreed with this way of preaching and therefore stressed the importance of equality. Though most Hindu beliefs could not contribute to the message that Guru Nanak spread, they did provide a structure that Guru Nanak improved upon.

With the knowledge that Sikh beliefs come from both Muslim and Hindu ideals, one can now deduce which actual beliefs of Sikhism come from which religion and how Sikhism created a new religion that surpassed their limits. Sikhism takes the appeal of monotheism from Islam and couples it with the belief of karma from Hinduism, which can be compared to the obligation of good behavior from Islam to create a religion that is pure and righteous. Sikhs substituted worshiping many gods as in Hinduism with *bhakti* or love of God and a sense of equal compassion for his children, providing a religion that is non-discriminant, an idea emphasized by Guru Nanak in the line: "There is no Hindu, no Mussalman" (Singh, 32). This inclusive attitude was made tangible with the establishment of *Guru Ka Langar*, a community kitchen, that was open to all where everyone, irrespective of caste, were made to sit down on one level to eat their food. This act demonstrated the equality of all that Guru Nanak strived for as well as the complete rejection of the caste system of Hinduism and the superiority complex of men above women in both Hinduism and Islam. Furthermore, this institution aided Guru Nanak in displaying his piety to God and humbleness to his people for Guru Nanak himself sat with his followers, washed the utensils and cooked the food (Singh, 48), signifying that he was equal to his followers, not above them.

Guru Nanak had observed the Muslim disapproval of the caste system and therefore founded *Guru Ka Langar*, he detected their condemning of idolatry and polytheism and

created a religion that was strictly monotheistic, with no avatars or reincarnations, and lastly he noted Muslims' dislike of the social disunity among the people of India and therefore stated that all men and women were created equal. Guru Nanak even saw the need of a spiritual leader that could relate to the people for guidance in other religions, so he became that guru, but still retained a meek stature, and often called himself a servant or slave of God (Singh, 41). Sikhism quelled all the wants, needs, and intentions of Hinduism and Islam and exceeded the restrictions they set on themselves with a religion whose only rule was to love God in any way one could.

Sikhism presented a belief system that gave guidelines to people on how to deal with all aspects of life, not just the spiritual facet. In a time of civil turmoil, this was the type of religion that India needed; a simple religion that did not have rituals or set instructions to follow. Anyone and everyone could execute the presented guidelines of Sikhism in their own personal way with God, and if they ever committed a wrong, the only people they answered to was themselves and God, for the meaning of Sikh was disciple, a person who is always learning from their mentor God, who takes millions of steps towards that person if that person takes one step towards them. Sikhism's universal message of brotherhood for all under the belief of one God offered its followers autonomy for interpretation, therefore clearly going beyond the boundaries of Hinduism and Islam, while providing the fortification needed to withstand any disaster, civil, physical, or mental through love, compassion, humility, and honor.



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"I dreamt of it": The Incredible Devotion

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Every person in this world dreams of something or the other. Even I have many dreams, but there is one which I would like to share with young readers. This is not a humdrum dream but very different from what most people imagine. Every dream is sparked by some stimulus or originates in some reason.

The reason can be anything. It can be anyone's desire to become rich as Bill Gates, or beautiful as Aishwarya, or smart as Amitabh Bachchan, or whatever. These feelings rise upper-most when you are in some special environment, like watching a movie, listening to songs or watching a celebrity.

However, the environment in which my dream was born was none other but the Sikh Jor Mela which took place last December at Fatehgarh Sahib, like every year. The feeling that came to me during the Mela was simply awesome. The environment was so beautiful that,

maybe, it is not possible for anyone to describe, as it has no comparisons. The question is that what made this place so beautiful, and a lot different from the outside world?

As far as I think it was the flood of love by the people for the great little souls of Sahibzadas, which is hard to define. It was as if the feeling of humanity and fraternity is overflowing through people. When I was walking down the lane during that time I could not understand how would I decline to have langar when so many people asked me to have the langar prepared by them. There was langar of all sorts. There were *poori choola*, *dal roti*, different kind of *sabji's*, *panjeri*, *jalebi'*, milk, tea, *pakorras*, *kheer*, *karha*, and I don't know what else. All these were being served with no limits. The best part is that those performing this *seva* were forcing and requesting to come and have all this. These people were mostly from nearby villages who had collected the money from their village and decided to hold the service of langar to mark this occasion. There were unlimited supplies of foodstuff of every kind one can possibly think of. At that time I was wondering why don't people marvel at this celebration.

In today's world, when a brother can kill his own brother for the sake of property or money, when a wife can murder her own husband, or vice versa, and many such sinful acts, then where do these people come from, who can give their money in the form of *seva*? Although I had seen many langars before, but it was the first time in my life that I had seen so many of them *together*. It was as if one could get a place to lay a table, than surely there would be langar on that table also. There was langar at each and every place one could think of. There were hundreds of langar and that also all together. I was so delighted to see them.

It was this time when my dream was born which I have been talking of for so long. I dreamt whether that even if I could also place a *langar* during Jor Mela ever in my life. But my dream consisted of somewhat different *langar*. I want to place a *langar* which would offer Dominos pizza's, MacDonald's burger's, ice cream from Baskin and Robins, coffee from Barista, swiss chocs, and much more of this sort. I just don't want to serve them but make the *sangat* eat with my hands. I want to give the best to the *sangat*. And I promise you that among many stalls of langar there would be a stall offering all these things within some years. I hope God will fulfill my dream as soon as possible.

Thank you for taking out your precious time and reading my article. Although every one dreams for himself but dreaming for others is what makes Sikhism unique...at last I would just say Proud to be a Sikh.

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