

THE WORLD ACCORDING TO SIKHI

By I.J. Singh

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*A Review by Laurie Bolger**

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The World According to Sikhi, a collection of twenty-five essays, marks the latest milestone on the journey I. J. Singh began in his immensely popular three earlier works.

Like its three predecessors, *The World According to Sikhi* is not a catechism about who Sikhs are, and what they believe or practice. Instead, **Sikhi is revealed as a vibrant path of multifaceted meaning and universal, timeless relevance.** This book covers the gamut of Sikh experience — from our identity in the diaspora and how the foundations of the faith continue to influence its followers today, to the ethical framework Sikhi provides for a useful, productive life.

Throughout the book runs the thread common to the personal journey of every serious spiritual seeker. The word “Sikh” implies being a continual student, and the essays mark the signposts along the way. It is a seemingly inverse path, progressing from **being** a Sikh simply by accident of birth, to **becoming** a Sikh. A committed practitioner of Sikhi strives to penetrate the meanings of the eternal teachings of the faith and formulate a personal response that incorporates them into all aspects of everyday life. **These essays are a cogent roadmap of the process whereby the journey becomes the destination, that is, as in all spiritual quests, uniquely one’s own.**

The World According to Sikhi invites the reader to **share in the joyous celebration of the inner life of the mind.** The first essay, “Guru Granth: Major Currents in the Sikh Scripture,” explores the heightened concept of the “Word.” Guru Granth, the eternal, living Guru of the Sikhs, speaks not only of the written or spoken Word, but also of the unspoken word, *anhad*, to which “the inner self vibrates and resonates such that the mind becomes part of divine connectivity.” The Word becomes God only when a Sikh reads it and adopts it, such that the universal and timeless values of Guru Granth provide an ethical compass for an examined life, one of introspection and self-awareness.

Because Guru Granth must be discussed and debated to remain vibrant and alive, Sikhs need to cultivate the habit of *vicchar*, **or critical thinking and thoughtful analysis.** Several of what are, in my admittedly-biased opinion as a librarian, Dr. Singh’s most satisfying essays, such as “The Shelf Life of a Book” and “Get Me Out of the Well,” bemoan the lack of meaningful books in Sikh homes and Gurdwaras. He chides Sikhs for being resistant to “books that are the repository of the Gurus’ ideas and teachings” and for not developing a love of reading that would allow them to fully discover the Guru in the Word, or *Shabd*, of Guru Granth.

A Sikh’s life, however, is certainly not only of solitary introspection. Sikhi clearly recognizes the need for a community, or *sangat*, of stimulating minds on the spiritual journey of self-exploration. As I.J. Singh reminds us in “The Company to Keep,” *sangat* can become the beginning of both “a personal transformation and a communal conversation.” In a *sangat* united in common purpose and prayer, a Sikh may truly commune with the Divine. It took over two hundred years for this concept of a spiritually awakened, egalitarian community to fully evolve. In “The Nature of Dialogue,” I.J. Singh discusses how the progressive teaching style of Guru Nanak — dialogue, discussion and debate — led to the

development of *sangat*, which matured into the concept of self-governance when Guru Gobind Singh instituted the Khalsa in 1699. After initiating his first five followers, and himself accepting initiation from their hands, there was “no distinction left between the Master and the Sikh.”

But while embracing the egalitarian message of Sikhi, Sikhs also “kept close to their hearts their timeless feudal roots.” How does the music of the universal message that is Sikhi play in the multi-cultural setting of the diaspora? What should Sikhs who live far from their traditional homeland make of their Punjab-based institutions? I.J. Singh explores the changing nature of these institutions, points a finger directly at the “feudal Indian society where authority flows from the top down,” along with “unfiltered transfer” of its values to the Sikh diaspora, and exposes the “virtual state of internal dissension and civil war” that exists in most gurdwaras.

However, he optimistically dissuades us from the belief that Sikhi is becoming hopelessly mired in stagnation and decay. As he explains in “The Journey and the Destination,” Sikhi can remain vibrant and relevant if its traditions and teachings continue to provide “a framework of ethics through which we can measure and negotiate our way through life.” We need to reinterpret our faith “in the language and the context of the times in which we live,” he argues, such that the legacy of the Gurus remains eternal and timeless.

The application of eternal Sikh values to some of today’s dilemmas are highlighted in a series of timely essays towards the end of this book. “The Many Ways of Mating” and “Same-Sex Unions” discuss how traditional Indian society comes to grips with modern love, both heterosexual and homosexual, and how Sikh humanitarian perspective can be a useful tool for exploring the controversial issue of gay and lesbian marriage.

“Tracking Evolution and Intelligent Design,” acknowledges how *vicchar*, an integral component of being a Sikh, can illuminate this complex matter in the light of Sikh teachings. Guru Nanak’s views of the creation of the universe are shown to be amazingly modern and totally in consonance with present-day scientific theories.

In “Some Wars are Just,” I.J. Singh starts with the ideas of Thomas Aquinas that have shaped western thinking on what constitutes just war, and explores the Sikh perspective on how to distinguish revenge from justice, while tempering an uncompromising sense of justice with mercy. Sikhs must remain armed, or *shastardhari*, intellectually, morally, and spiritually, as well as physically, if they are to fight not only when war is inevitable, but every day on “the battlefield of the mind.”

I.J. Singh returns to this inner world in his last essay, “Festina Lente,” which discusses the idea of *sehaj*, a centered mind that is so fundamental to Sikh thinking. “Hasten slowly,” the title of this essay counsels us. Approaching life with equipoise and a sense of humility elevates our productivity, replacing our obsessive concerns with an awareness of the Infinite within us. This lesson is the last, but certainly not the least, of the timeless concepts of the Sikh Path that *The World According to Sikhi* illuminates for the spiritual seeker who journeys through its pages.

There are, admittedly, a few bumps along the journey that prevent it from being one of unmitigated bliss. While this book is of undeniable interest and appeal to a wide audience of all religious persuasions, some topics may require more explanation for a non-Sikh.

An innovative feature of all the essays in this book is that each ends with a powerfully impressive last sentence or two. These phrases reminded me of the *rahao* line that focuses on the main idea of a *shabd*. They might have been even more effective had each been connected to a central citation of Gurbani tied to the theme of the essay.

Several essays refer to the growing presence of non-Punjabi Sikhs; unfortunately, these

mentions are far too few and scattered, and need to be pulled together in a cohesive way. I would urge I.J. Singh, who speaks so cogently about Sikh life in the diaspora throughout the book, to produce some essays spotlighting these “forgotten” Sikhs.

Topics such as sexism and casteism that, contrary to the teachings of the Gurus, continue to infest Sikh cultural practices, deserve more in-depth coverage. **I would like to see I.J. Singh focus on these significant realities of Sikh life in essays that might spur readers to much-needed remedial action.**

These caveats aside, this book is an extraordinary collection of writings. In his Preface, I.J. Singh tells us, **“Essentially, we experience the world outside in terms of the universe within ourselves ... To see and nurture this connection between the universe within and the world outside remains to me the key to understanding Sikhi. How to explore it, how best to describe the process is the very ambitious goal of these essays.”** **In my opinion, Dr. Singh has admirably achieved his objective.**

As in his three previous works, which have all enjoyed enormous, well-deserved success, all the essays that form this latest book are immensely insightful and engaging, done in an articulate and accessible style that is full of trenchant commentary and a genuinely delightful brand of dry, subtle wit.

His writings strike the perfect balance between presenting material that anyone, regardless of background, can readily identify with, and making one’s mind stretch effortlessly, to accommodate new ideas and ways of thinking.

One gentle word of warning is in order, however. These essays are easy to read, and often quite amusing. Yet they are anything but superficial, and taking them lightly will only shortchange the reader. Their multiple layers of meaning are like a *Matryoshka*, the Russian wooden doll with numerous nested components hidden within it.

I.J. Singh’s latest book warmly welcomes you like a treasured friend, and also extends to you an irresistible invitation to return again and again. Indeed, *The World According to Sikhi* deserves prolonged and repeated reflection, real *vicchar*. But isn’t that exactly what Sikhi is truly all about!

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