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Abstract

In lieu of an abstract, below is the essay's first paragraph.

"The understanding of the scriptures within a religion is often imperative to the understanding of that religion as a whole. The content of the scriptures, as well as their origin and the message that they represent, are all very important aspects of learning about a religion. The religion of Sikhism is no exception to this idea. The understanding of this Indian religion derives from the comprehension of the complex sequence of development and current usage of its scriptures, commonly known as the Adi Granth."

Sikhism: The Religion of the Gurus

by

Megan Tiernan

The understanding of the scriptures within a religion is often imperative to the understanding of that religion as a whole. The content of the scriptures, as well as their origin and the message that they represent, are all very important aspects of learning about a religion. The religion of Sikhism is no exception to this idea. The understanding of this Indian religion derives from the comprehension of the complex sequence of development and current usage of its scriptures, commonly known as the Adi Granth.

1. Who are the Sikhs?

A. Basic Background

The Sikhs are a religious group of people centered in Punjab, India (Voorst 121). Due to their often persecuted, minority status within India, they form a close-knit group of followers that uphold a strong sense of community (Wilkinson 45). Sikhs believe in one God, with their lifelong goal being “to move through five spiritual stages to achieve a favorable rebirth or liberation from the cycle of rebirth” (Wilkinson 51). This belief in rebirth, and the lifelong desire to be freed from it, is similar to other world religions such as Buddhism or Hinduism. Yet, Sikhism is unique from these religions based on its strong, central belief in the one God—a monotheistic characteristic that can be found in some of the other well-known religions, including those of Islam or Christianity.

B. Followers of the Gurus

The Punjabi word Sikh means learner (Bowker 76). The way in which Sikhs learn of their one God and how to be like Him is extremely distinctive of their religion. “Sikhism is based on the religious teachings of ten spiritual leaders” (Bowker, J. ed. 66). These Sikh leaders have evolved over many years and are known as gurus. “In the religious sense, a Sikh is someone who believes in one God, Sat Guru, or ‘true teacher,’

and follows the Gurus who reveal his teachings” (Bowker 76). Much as Christianity follows the teachings of Jesus, or Islam follows the rules of Mohammed, Sikhs look to the ten gurus as a connection to the one God within their religion. “Gurus in Indian religions are spiritual guides. The word ‘guru’ means ‘weighty one’ and gurus are those who bear the weight of wisdom and knowledge” (Bowker 80). This wisdom and knowledge affects all aspects of the Sikh way of life. “The Gurus do not simply teach and guide individuals; they are community leaders as well” (Bowker 80).

2. The Ten Gurus

A. The Founding Guru

The first guru, or spiritual leader, of Sikhism, is known as Guru Nanak. Guru Nanak formed the religion of Sikhism from a personal experience, which directed his sacred calling in life. This is the story of his awakening:

In 1499, while he was bathing in the Bein River, he experienced the call of God. He was given a cup filled with amrit and commanded, ‘Nanak, this is the cup of devotion of the Name: drink this...I am with you, and I bless you and exalt you. Whoever remembers you will receive my blessing. Go, rejoice in My Name. Let this be your vocation.

Bowker 78

This mysterious revelation is the starting point for the Sikh religion. Nanak’s choice to follow the advice presented to him helped to spread and develop the religion. “[Nanak] became a wandering preacher, teaching that everything is created by God, and the way to come close to him is through devotion and meditation, not ritual” (Bowker 80). In other words, Sikhism began to form on the foundations of inner peace and contemplation,

rather than by encouraging outward displays of worship, such as ritualistic sacrifices or daily offerings practiced by many of the other world religions. “Guru Nanak did not regard other religions as worthless, but he did believe that their attention to the detail of ritual and outward observance was a severe impediment to a relationship with God, who can be found better within” (Bowker 77).

Guru Nanak also helped form the foundations of Sikhism by enforcing other main ideas such as, “that God created all things, and that all things are dependent on God’s will or hukam” (Bowker 76). Therefore, the Sikhs were taught to believe in creationism, and God’s power. This founding guru’s obedient decision to spread the word of the one God through his divine experience taught Sikh believers that “God does not become manifest in the world but his will becomes known through the Gurus” (Bowker 76). A final lasting impact that Guru Nanak had on the evolution of Sikhism was the action he took to prolong its survival before his death. “In designating one of his followers, Lahina, to be his successor as Guru, the Sikh movement thus continued beyond his death with a succession of Gurus” (Bowker 78). This important decision created a pattern for the next nine gurus and thus also helped the religion to flourish and grow.

B. A Succession of Gurus

The second guru after Guru Nanak is known as Guru Angad. Guru Angad was important because he was chosen as the first successor in the progression of the gurus. The fact that Guru Angad was chosen based on a cognitive decision as opposed to a hereditary obligation is also important to the Sikh succession of gurus. “By choosing a follower rather than a son, Guru Nanak set a pattern for Guruship based on devotion rather than kinship” (Bowker 81). In other words, Guru Nanak chose a successor that he

felt would be the best to further communicate his teachings and continue the true messages of God through the understanding of his Sikh faith.

Each guru helped to contribute an important characteristic to the Sikh religion. The third guru, Guru Amar Das, was known for the certain types of observance that he created for the religion: “And introduced Sikh rituals for birth and death that were distinct from existing Hindu ones” (Bowker 81). Since some of the main Sikh ideas are similar to those of the Hinduism faith, such as the idea of rebirth, it is significant for specific rituals and practices to be incorporated in the Sikh religion, making it more distinctive and unified. The fourth guru is known as Guru Ram Das. “Guru Ram Das built the ‘pool of Nectar,’ or Amritsar, hence the place of that name with the Golden Temple near it, the major place of Sikh devotion” (Bowker 77). In other words, the fourth guru had a holy lake made around the Golden Temple—the original Sikh gurdwara that serves as a prominent place of Sikh worship (McLeod 30).

Interestingly enough, the next guru, Guru Arjan, built this temple as well as contributing to the organization of the Sikh scriptures. “He collected the hymns of the previous gurus, and, with his own 2,216 contributions, prepared the Guru Granth Sahib...He also built the Golden Temple, which was to house the holy book” (Bowker 81). This holy book would become an official part of the Sikh religion later on in the progression of gurus, however the process of its formation is important to note, as influenced by the fifth guru.

The sixth guru was actually the son of Guru Arjan; however, as stated before, his appointment was not based around this fact. Guru Hargobind “proclaimed that the Guru must be a military leader as well as a spiritual leader” (Bowker 81). This demand was

made as a result of some of the political skirmishes that the minorities of Sikhs were facing within their Indian homelands. The seventh guru was the grandson of Guru Hargobind. An interesting fact about the eighth guru was that he became guru at age five (Bowker 81).

The ninth guru is an especially important leading figure for Sikhs, due to the extreme amount of conviction that he held for the Sikh faith. Guru Tegh Bahadur can be seen as a martyr for he was “beheaded in Delhi in 1675 after refusing to convert to Islam” (Bowker 80). The tenth guru, Guru Gobind Singh was the last human guru. “Guru Gobind Singh was the second most important Guru and the founder of the khalsa, the foremost institution of the Sikh community” (Bowker 80). The tenth guru is also important because after him, the next and final guru was designated as the Sikh scriptures rather than another male follower.

He is believed to have announced that after his death Guruship would be embodied by the Panth (Sikh community) and the scriptures. The volume is known respectfully as Guru Granth Sahib since Guru Gobind Singh instructed his followers to regard it as their Guru.

Bowker 69

3. The Guru Granth Sahib

A. Purpose of the Adi Granth

The Guru Granth Sahib marked the end of the succession of the gurus. The Guru Granth Sahib was the final embodiment of the gurus of Sikh tradition (Bowker 83). Most of all, these scriptures were said to hold the complete messages of God for the Sikh community. “It is the most important of all Sikh scriptures and is primal in the sense that

Sikhs believe it uncovers the truth about God, the Primal Being, which has been true for all eternity” (Bowker 83). Each of the previous gurus helped to contribute to and share these messages, but the Guru Granth Sahib represents the final product, a lasting representation of all that Sikhism stands for.

“Guru Granth Sahib initiates a disciple on the path of spiritual progress and guides him at the various stages of his journey to God” (Cole 251). Therefore, it is understood that just as Sikh followers in the past looked to the human gurus for guidance and direction to the one God, Sikh followers now become familiar with the Adi Granth as their source of leadership. It is important to remember that Sikhs believe that both the human and written gurus are entirely created through God’s power. “According to the Sikh faith, it was God alone who inspired the human gurus and the Sikh holy book...It is for this reason that God is called the ‘Sat Guru’ or ‘true guru’” (Wilkinson 50).

B. Format of the Adi Granth

As previously mentioned, the Adi Granth was being compiled many years before it was named the final guru, mainly by Guru Arjan. The Adi Granth consists of “hymns of varying lengths, mostly conveying the message that spiritual liberation comes through a belief in the divine name, or Nam, not through external ritual” (Bowker 83). It can then be understood that the Sikh scriptures are intimate elaborations of the one God, which help to define the depths of the Sikh faith. Sikhs have their specific traditions and way of treating things, such as where and how to store the scriptures; however, it is essentially not practiced as a religion based around outward acts of worship or rituals. The fact that these ideas can be revealed through the scriptures is a strong example of why it is

important to understand the scriptures of a religion in order to accurately comprehend the beliefs and ways of its followers.

“The standard length of the book is 1,430 pages” (Bowker 83). The hymns that make up these pages are then further organized into thirty-one sections following musical scales, called “ragas.” These ragas are then further distinguished by the guru that they are associated with, referred to by the correctly corresponding number of “mahalla”, the word that is used to replace the formal naming of each guru (Bowker 82). This system of categorization within the Adi Granth is somewhat complex; yet it is logical to its pattern of development through the succession of gurus.

C. The Gurdwara

The gurdwara is the name for the Sikh temple, the center of Sikh life. “The gurdwara houses the Guru Granth Sahib, the Sikh scripture, which is a focus of reverence within it” (Bowker 77). Much like a Christian church keeps the Bible, it is the same with the Sikh gurdwara and the Adi Granth. Since the Guru Granth Sahib is being honored as if it were a human guru, certain respectful practices accompany it. “It is kept under a canopy and on top of a throne, and is laid to rest at a special place at night, covered in rumalas, or decorative cloths” (Bowker 82). It is important to remember, though, that it is not the book itself that is being worshipped by the Sikhs, it is the messages of the one God within it that are being respected.

Any knowledgeable Sikh is permitted to read from the Adi Granth; however, it is a duty reserved for Sikh officials when it comes time for worship and meeting in the gurdwara (Bowker 82). The regulations for being a Sikh official are quite open. “Unlike many other religions, both men and women can officiate at Sikh ceremonies and either

can read the Guru Granth Sahib” (Bowker 82). This open approach, once again, reinforces the fact that the Sikh religion is one that focuses on the individual understanding and appreciation of the relationship with the one God, rather than ritualistic restrictions.

It was interesting to discover how a normally assumed human leadership role of faith could be passed down to a book of scriptures, and still be regarded almost as if it were human. The way that the Sikh faith focuses strongly on personal growth and understanding, rather than ritual, is a respectable aspect of their system of beliefs; especially in a time where it seems as if too many people in this world get caught up in going through the motions of their religion, while not really striving to understand their faith.

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