

Sikhism

God's palace
is beautiful;

it is adorned with bright gems, rubies,
Pearls and diamonds; it is surrounded by a
golden fortress, and is an abode of pleasure.

How shall I scale the fortress without a
ladder? By meditating on God through the
Guru I shall behold Him. The Guru giving me
God's name is my ladder, my boat and my
raft....'

I. THE BIRTH OF SIKHISM

Muslim-Hindu Conflict

SIKHISM, WITH a following today of six to eight million, cannot be understood apart from the story of Hinduism and Islam in India. When, five centuries ago, that movement which would try to reconcile two very different religions, was born in the person of Guru Nanak, Islam had already been affecting India for 500 years. Hinduism, without any creedal cohesion, has always been vulnerable to religious, political and military incursions. And Islam took ample advantage of each of them. As Arnold Toynbee points out, the "Indian and Judaic religions are notoriously different in spirit; and where they have met, they have sometimes behaved like oil and vinegar."

Sometimes the progress of Muhammad's faith was made by peaceful, theological argument; other times conversion came at the end of the sword. Consider an Islamic historian's account of the 17th century Muslim Emperor Aurangzeb²: "It reached the ears of His Majesty, the Protector of the Faith, that. . . foolish Brahmins were in the habit of expounding frivolous books in their schools, and that students, learned Mussalmans (Muslims) as well as Hindus, went there even from long distances led by a desire to become acquainted with the wicked sciences there taught. The Director of the Faith consequently issued orders to all the governors of the provinces to destroy with willing hands the temples and schools of the infidels, and to put an entire stop to the teaching and practice of idolatrous forms of worship. . . ."³ This monarch, who **later** put to death the ninth Guru of the Sikhs, and who forced the last Guru, Gobind Singh, to flee from the Punjab and destroyed his four sons, was anathema to all non-Muslim sects.

Though there have been Muslim mystics who have urged and practiced toleration of Hindus, and Muslim "heretics" who could

¹ Selections from the Sacred Writings of the Sikhs, UNESCO, Macmillan, N.Y., 1960, p. 10.

² However, Aurangzeb was not a typical Mughul ruler. His tyranny was infamous.

³ Quoted, Max Arthur Macauliffe, *The Sikh Religion*, Oxford Univ. Press, New Delhi, 1963, vol. one, p. xlvii. This is the definitive English text and history of the Sikhs.

likewise be tolerant', the official Muslim attitude toward the Hindu has often been—from the time prior to Nanak, throughout his life, and up until the partition of India into Muslim and Hindu States in 1946—hostile, and "ready to take advantage of the Hindu." ⁵

When Muslims ruled India many of the lower classes left Hinduism for Islam to escape heavy taxation. However, the warrior-caste Rajputs and the proud Brahmins resisted the tax—which was levelled only on all non-Muslims. As a result "their fiefs and offices were seized, their womenfolk abused, their sacred shrines were razed, and many of them lost their lives." ⁶

However, Hinduism endured. Neither its rituals nor its faith could be broken by force. And the more learned followers of Muhammad eventually became acquainted with India's ancient culture and were able to see that country's purer aspects. In addition, intermarriage between Muslim men and Hindu women was a factor in mollifying animosity. At times Hindu women became Muslim wives or concubines with no change of faith. A final factor which contributed some relief to the Hindu was the fact that Islam was itself partially divided. Besides Sunnite emperors like Aurangzeb, there were Shi`ite Muslims and other sectarian groups. They often came to India from Iraq, Arabia and Egypt to flee the persecution of the orthodox, having heard that India was hospitable to all faiths. The Sufis especially seemed to blend peaceably with the Hindus. By 1500, the Sufi saints took their places comfortably beside the Hindu saddhus and Muslim pirs.

All of this sets the stage for Kabir, a type of John the Baptist figure for Guru Nanak. One could only wish, in view of the subsequent Hindu-Muslim conflict in India, that Kabir and his successor could have been more effective.

John Clark Archer, *The Sikhs*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 1946, p. 42. For a detailed account of Muslim-Hindu relations prior to and through Nanak's time, cf. "Fallow Garden and **Fruitful Seed**", pp. 37-55.

[ibid], p. 42.

⁶ */ibid*, p. 44.

Kabir

Kabir was a name inspired by a Muslim who on opening the Quran encountered this Arabic word meaning "great." Al-Kabir appears in the Quran as one of Allah's ninety-nine "excellent names." Kabir himself wrote this couplet: "Thou art great, you are the same, your name (God's Name) is Kabir...." Though it cannot be determined whether Nanak knew Kabir personally or had just heard of him, Kabir and his heritage are explicitly recognized by Sikhs. Their holy book, the *Adi Granth*, contains a significant number of Kabir's sayings and hymns.

Both Hindus and Muslims claim that Kabir is theirs by his condition of birth. He called himself a "pir of both religions," a disciple of the true Guru, God. ⁸ Whatever the circumstances, he appears to have been raised in a low caste Muslim family, with the possibility that his mother was formerly a Brahmin. He seems to be equally influenced by both religions. A Hindu leader, Ramanand, an opponent of caste and an exponent of love for men of every race, creed and order, had many followers in Kabir's time. Some feel that Kabir might once have been his disciple. On the other side, – though no direct evidence of Sufi affiliation is found in Kabir's writings, it is nevertheless obvious that he was deeply influenced by Sufi thought."

Whatever his sources, Kabir began what Nanak was to take up later. He struck out against caste, idolatry, and externalism, siding with neither the Vedas nor the Quran: "I and you are of one blood, and one life animates us both; from one mother is the world born; what knowledge is this that makes us separate?"

There is nothing but water at the holy bathing places; I
know that they are useless, for I have bathed in them.
The images are all lifeless; they cannot speak; I know,
for I have cried aloud to them.

Pralbakar Machwe, Kabir. Sahitya Akademi, New Delhi, 1968, p. 10.

⁸ Archer, *Ibid.* p. 51.

⁹ *Ibid.* p. 12.

¹⁰) Quoted in James Bissett Pratt, *India and its Faiths*. Houghton Mifflin Co., Boston, 1915, p. 237.

The Purana and the Koran are mere words; lifting up the curtain, **I** have seen (God)."

Understandably, Kabir was persecuted by both Hindus and Muslims: Brahmins disliked his condemnation of their caste—especially in view of his own low origin; Muslims charged him with disturbing the peace. Yet he was allowed to live his seventy or eighty years (1440-1518), gather several thousand disciples and found a **still** wholesome religion (the Kabir Panths); but most importantly, Kabir prepared the way of a more influential figure.

Guru Nanak

In the fifteenth century of the Christian era both India and Europe were awakened to an acute sense of spiritual and intellectual responsibility. ¹² "There **is** a wonderful analogy between the spiritual condition of Europe and India during the dark ages. In Europe most religious works were in Latin, in India they were in Sanskrit. In both continents all learning was in the hands of the priesthood, and this admittedly led to serious abuses. A great cyclic wave of reformation then overspread both continents. During the very period that Luther and Calvin in Europe were warning men of the errors that had crept into Christianity, several Indian saints were denouncing priestcraft, hypocrisy and idolatry, and with very considerable success. Several of those great men who led the crusade against superstition, founded sects which still survive; but the most numerous and powerful of all is the great Sikh sect founded by Guru Nanak." ¹³

In Kabir's time, when that saint was working in the Benares region to amalgamate the best parts of Hinduism and Islam, Nanak was born up north, in the Punjab, in a village near Lahore, now in Pakistan. In 1470, the date of Nanak's birth, Lahore was the old Muslim capital of the Punjab, but the village in which Nanak lived had been established by a Hindu raja, and was peopled mostly by

¹² "One Hundred Poems by Kabir, translated by Rabindranath Tagore, Macmillan, London, 1915, XLII.

¹² Macauliffe, *Ibid.*, vol. I, chap. I.

¹³ Macauliffe, *Ibid.*, p. xl.

Hindus. Nanak, therefore "came of stock which was predominantly if not altogether Hindu."

Though tradition ascribes heavenly portents" at Nanak's birth and during his early years, he came from a humble caste, and went about his education like his contemporaries. In a local school, roughly corresponding to the elementary school of today, he learned the characters of Hindi and the Arabic and Persian alphabet of the Urdu. However, he was fortunate in that a Muslim villager—a friend of Nanak's father, who was himself childless—took a fancy to him and introduced him to Shi`ite Muslim doctrine. Thus at an early age he was able to observe both the mosque and the temple. In fact, he took such an excessive interest in religion at this point to the detriment of relations with his father—who thought him mad—that his quota of manual labor was often left unfulfilled. Though his father complained and rebuked him, he died in Nanak's youth, leaving the lad more or less free to pursue his own path.

In time Nanak became acquainted with Hindu sacred writings, some of the "sayings" of Muhammad and portions of the Quran. But perhaps of more significance than his schooling and contact with sacred writ were his natural inclination and his association with sadhus and Sufis. There were not only Muslims and Hindus, but in addition Parsis, Jews and most probably Christians among the sages in the region where he grew up. Although Nanak exhibited unusual piety, he lived an ordinary life, marrying at the age of fourteen or nineteen." However, by the time Nanak had reached his thirties, he and his wife had gone separate ways, she returning to her family (her mother also thought Nanak was

¹⁴ Archer, *The Sikhs*, p. 65.

" Sikhs later saw signs of Nanak's coming in the expectations of Shi`ite Muslims' "Imam" and the Hindu avatar. Legends include the coming of "the Lord" at Nanak's birth, "unbeaten sounds" were heard at the gateway of his mother's parents' house, the babe's voice was that of a wise man whose laughter rang with wisdom, and six ascetics, nine raths, fifty-two birs, sixty-four yoginis, eighty-four siddhs, and three hundred and thirty million devas (gods) all came to testify at his birth that he was a great saint who had come to save the world. Cf. Archer, *Ibid.* pp. 67-68.

¹⁵ in India is never merely one event on a certain day: it begins with betrothal and concludes with the consummation." Archer, *Ibid.* p. 71.

"mad"), and he, after showing little affection to her, quit his job as a revenue-collector, which he had taken to support the household, and began his ascetic life. Like the later Gandhi, however, who also renounced his married life, Nanak maintained a formal association with his wife.

Mardana the minstrel, a Muslim servant, was destined to become Nanak's life-long companion. He would accompany Nanak with his guitar-like instrument, the *rebeck*, while the latter uttered God-inspired hymns to those who would gather to hear him in their wanderings throughout India. Together they meditated, discussed, taught, composed hymns and travelled extensively. Thus it is not at all improbable that they came across Kabir in Benares and came under his influence. Tradition states that this did in fact occur near Nanak's thirtieth year when Kabir was quite a bit older.

Nearing fifty, Nanak began the final phase of his career in response to a vision of God: God pledged His favor to the holy man, promised him success and offered him a cup of holy nectar as a token. During this experience Nanak heard the sound of the "True Name" and learned that he would be the guru of *Sat Nam*, True Name. He was to teach the simple sure way of salvation by repetition of God's name. Those that would follow, *Sikhs*—meaning disciples—could be freed from the terrible wheel of transmigration.

In time Nanak had collected a small informal band of disciples, in the tradition of Indian religion. They included, besides Mardana, Lahna, "a simple, sincere man who under the name of Angad later became at Nanak's death head of the Sikh movement"⁷, Bala, a Sindhi Jat⁸, and Sri Chand, who was Nanak's son. With these men, and his new calling to teach the "True Name," Nanak spent in addition to the previous twenty years of wandering, another twenty or so more, until his death. Whether he really had an idea of establishing a new religion, or installing a new bible, we do not know. Certainly it was not done during his

⁷ Archer, *Mid*, p. 76.

⁸ One of the Muslim peoples (Sindhs) who lived in Jat, a region in the Punjab.

lifetime, for when he left a village after singing sacred hymns and teaching, he made no effort to leave behind any followers, organization or shrine. The one thing he did do to assure the continuity of Sikhism, however, was to effect, in the presence of a great number of his followers, a succession of his power to Angad. As he lay dying, he uttered the Divine Name, "made obeisance to God, and blended his light with Guru Angad's." ¹⁹

When the sheet which had covered him was removed the next morning, tradition asserts there was nothing found beneath it. That put to an abrupt end an argument that had developed the day before: Nanak's Hindu followers wanted to cremate the body, while his Muslim followers wanted to bury it. Nearby, Sikhs subsequently built a shrine and Muslims erected a tomb in his honor. But since then they both have been washed away by the river, "perhaps providentially," Macauliffe says, "so as to avoid idolatrous worship of the Guru's last resting place." ²⁰

II. SIKH DOCTRINE

Nanak's Vision of God

Like Muhammad and Kabir, Nanak vigorously proclaimed the oneness and unity of God. However, the God of Nanak is rather more like the immanent Vishnu than Allah. That Nanak believed God is omnipresent is well illustrated in the famous story of his falling asleep with his feet towards Mecca. An outraged Muslim pointed out his blasphemous deed. To which Nanak replied: "If you think I show disrespect by having my feet towards the house of God, turn them in some other direction where God does not dwell.

Nanak's vision includes a thorough description of God: **"He** cannot be installed, nor can He be made. The immaculate God is self-created. God created Himself and He created the Name." ² Then "He created Nature and. . .looked on it with delight. . . .

¹⁹ Macauliffe. *Ibid.* vol. I, p. 190.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 191.

¹ Selections from the Sacred Writings of the Sikhs. p. 22.

² Bhai Jodh Singh, *Gospel of Guru Nanak*, Language Dept. (Punjab), Punjab, 1972, p.

Who can sing (of) His might? Who has got the capacity to do that? Who can sing of His gifts or know His signs? Millions have tried to describe Him but find no end. If I know Him, why do I not describe Him? Because words fail to do that." ³

God is all-pervading, yet transcendent: "Thousands of eyes hast Thou, but no eyes are Thine. Thousands of forms are Thine but Thou hast no form. Thousands of unstained feet hast Thou but no foot is Thine." ⁴ Several of the Hindu gods are retained as subordinate beings which does not militate against the Guru's strict monotheism, just as the lesser beings (angels, etc.) in Zoroastrianism, Islam and Christianity do not contradict their belief in one Creator. The place of these Hindu *devas* is clearly defined by Nanak in this key passage from one of his hymns: "For countless ages there was Darkness. There was no heaven or earth, but only the ordainer Infinite. There was neither the Sun nor the Moon, neither day nor night. He (God) was in Nirvi kalpa Gamadha (a state of mental concentration where thought ceases). . . . Upper regions, this world and the lower regions existed not, no hell or paradise, no birth, death or transmigration. No Brahma, Vishnu or Siva was then." ⁵ Later, "When it pleased Him, He caused the universe and without any supports set the heavens. He created Brahma, Vishnu and Siva and caused attachment to illusion to grow." ⁶

The concept of *maya* is also carried over from Hinduism, and therefore, matter is recognized to be an illusion: "Ever and ever You are one; duality is a play of Thine. Whom should I describe as separate from Thee, there is none." ⁷

If there is any personal God in Sikhism—it would probably be best described as God in his aspect of the Guru. In Nanak's words: "In the shining lamps of the Sun and the Moon, I see, uninterrupted, my Beloved, ever-young. By his grace He has attuned my mind to Him. The True Guru has made me realize the unity.. .

³ Ibid, p. 11.

⁴ Ibid, p. 13.

⁵ Ibid, p. 19.

⁶ Ibid, p. 20.

Ibid, p. 3.

through the Guru **I** have realized the One, (who is) impurity-free." ⁸

In espousing his doctrine of God, Nanak is decidedly more of a reformer than the mystical Kabir, often lodging a strong, caustic protest against an inaccurate understanding of God. Of Hindu idolatry, Nanak says, "The ignorant fools take stones, and worship them. O Hindus, how shall the stone, which itself sinketh, carry you across?" ⁹ Once, stopping on his travels at the estate of a wealthy Lahore farmer named Duni Chand, who treated the Guru very affectionately, Nanak inquired as to why that man had flags hanging over his door. He replied that each flag represented one hundred thousand rupees that he had acquired. At this Nanak gave Duni Chand a needle and asked him to keep it until he asked for it in the next world. Duni Chand gave it to his wife and asked her to put it away for the purpose indicated. She thought **her** husband was crazy and asked him how a needle could go to the next world. Duni Chand, needle in hand, went back to Nanak and explained his wife's reaction. Thereupon Nanak said, "If such a small and light thing as a needle cannot go to the next world, how can thy wealth reach there?" Duni Chand fell at the Guru's feet, and implored him **to** reveal how his wealth could get to the next world. The Guru replied, "Give some of thy wealth in God's name, feed the poor, and thy wealth shall accompany thee." ¹⁰

The Granth

In its holy book, the *A di Granth* ("Original Book"), the Sikh religion compiles firsthand compositions of its founder and his successors. Later, the tenth Guru put together another *Granth* and Sikhs usually honor them both, calling the complete version the *Granth Sahib* ("Book of the Lord"). The writings of the Sikh Gurus and saints were composed in medieval Indian dialects. Thus one encounters hymns in Persian, Hindi, old Punjabi, and several local dialects. In many hymns the Arabic and Sanskrit vocabularies are freely used."

⁸ *Ibid*, p. 3.

⁹ Macauliffe, *Ibid*, p. 326.

¹⁰ *Ibid*, p. 130.

Ibid, p. v.

Angad became the second Guru, the second of ten. Guru Gobind Singh (1666-1708), the final Guru, proclaimed that with himself the line of living Gurus was to end. However, Sikhs would not be without a Guru; in fact, the *Granth* would serve as the Eternal Guru from that point on. Here was begun an extreme reverence by Sikhs for their holy book, which Toynbee maintains far surpasses that of Muslims, Christians and Jews for their Quran, Bible and Torah.¹² In the beautiful central Sikh shrine at Amritsar, though the temple is devoted to the One God and contains no images, "a visible representation of the invisible God is believed to be present in the sacred book. The Granth is, in fact, the real divinity of the shrine, and is treated as if it had a veritable personal existence. Every morning it is dressed out in costly brocade, and reverently placed on a low throne under a jewelled canopy. Every evening it is made to repose for the night in a golden bed within a consecrated chamber, railed off and protected from all profane intrusion by bolts and bars."¹³

It was the fifth Guru, Arjan (1563-1606), who began assembling the writings of his predecessors into the work called the *Adi Granth*. To these hymns and those of Kabir, he added songs by Muslims and Hindus. Guru Gobind Singh subsequently produced a lengthier version of the *Granth*, adding his own work and that of the intervening four Gurus. Upon completion of this second *Granth*, he proclaimed that its pages were to be henceforth regarded as the living voice of all the prophets.

During Arjan's office it became clear that the century-old faith needed a reappraisal of its mission, as well as a redefinition of its place in regard to Hinduism and Islam: for on the one hand, "Sikhism was tending to become. . . a movement within non-ecclesiastical Hinduism" and on the other, "an order by the side of ecclesiastical Islam."¹⁴ It was an appropriate time, then, for the growing number of Sikhs to canonize their gospel. Like Nanak, who encouraged the communal and practical and steered away from austerities, Arjan was pragmatic, opposing extreme mysti-

¹² Cf. preface by Toynbee, *Selections from the Sacred Writings of the Sikhs*, p. 9.

¹³ Monier-Williams, *Brahmanism and Hinduism*, J. Murray, London, 1891, p. 177.

¹⁴ Archer, *Ibid.*, pp. 143-144.

cism. His idea of the shape the Sikh movement ought to take was as realistic as his practical idea of an official gospel. Arjan also initiated tithing and the first missionary work of Sikhs, who had an advantage over Hinduism in that regard, in view of the fact that for Hindus, foreign travel was taboo, being considered harmful to religion.

The first *Granth* contained thirty-eight psalms of Nanak which together comprise just a small portion of the larger work, but which by virtue of their authorship, message and style set the tone for the rest. This book of psalms is called the *Japji*, and was an inspiration for future works. In these hymns Nanak expresses a type of world-renunciation altogether different from pilgrimage, ritual exercise and ascetic solitude. What was important was the profession and understanding of the Name: if one would be freed from sin, he should speak the Name and comprehend its love; if one would know all places and all worlds and achieve what the gods experience, he should attend upon the Name, in inward meditation and repetition.

The *Japji* is considered the key to the *Adi Granth*. A true Sikh is supposed to recite it silently each morning. Every Sikh, to be considered orthodox, must memorize it, whether he can read or not, because of the importance of the morning service. It appears to have been a product of Guru Nanak in his later years. Nanak, of course, was literate: and besides this he frequently compared his teachings with others. He learned Persian and read Sufi writings. He read Indian literature in Hindustani or in Punjabi. He even went so far in the *Japji* as to create a new alphabet and grammar for his religion called the Gurmukhi, or "Guru Tongue." This awkward, artificial language was created from local dialects, Arabic and Persian words, and the vernacular Punjabi. But it proved timeworthy, and remained as the Sikh classical language, the language of the *Granth*.

Doctrine and Ethics

The *Japji* introduces themes not only from Nanak's original vision of God as Sat Nam, but also from traditional Hindu doc-

trines such as transmigration and karma. In some cases these concepts are modified and redefined. In other cases they are discredited and superseded.

The *Granth* reveals to us that the God of Nanak, besides being the Creator, is also the destroyer: "He who created also destroys; apart from Him there is no other. . . Having destroyed He builds and having built He destroys. Casting down He raises up and raising up He casts down." ¹⁵ The world of His creation is impermanent and unstable; only He is Eternal. However, when Nanak refers to maya, or the false nature of this world, there is a subtle distinction between his concept and the classical Vedanta notion. Whereas the latter refers to a world whose duality is a cosmic illusion, the former denotes a world which, though impermanent, is very real.

The results of a man becoming caught up in maya, however, are much the same for both religions. In Nanak's words: "Maya's disciple is false; he abhors the Truth. Bound up in duality he transmigrates." ¹⁶ The essence of Nanak's belief in transmigration is picturesquely described in his own account of his journey toward salvation: "O my Lord, who can comprehend Thy excellences! None can recount my sinfulness./ Many times I was born as a tree, many times as an animal, many times I came in the form of a snake, and many times I flew as a bird./ Many times did I break into city shops, strong buildings, and having burgled them, return home. I looked ahead and behind but how could it be concealed from Thee?/ (I have visited) places of pilgrimage. . . . I have seen all regions of the world. . . ." ¹⁷

That men are sinful seems to be a part of Nanak's theology; for even Nanak himself needed the grace of God to escape the cycle of birth and death: "As the oceans are filled with water, so immense is my sinfulness. Be merciful, show a measure of Thy Grace that this sinking stone may cross over." " The sinner is one

¹⁵ Quoted from the *Granth* in W.H. McLeod, *Guru Nanak and the Sikh Religion*, Oxford Univ. Press, London, 1968, p. 169.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 186.

Ibid., p. 177.

Ibid., p. 177.

who chooses freely to affiliate with this world, when he could receive the gift of grace given to the world through Nanak. He is one who is loyal to his own voice, not that of the Guru, a *manmukh*: "The Manmukh's mind is clogged with falsehood. He does not meditate on (the Name of) God and so suffers the penalties of sin."¹⁹

The fate of the sinner and the saint after death, besides the clear division of those freed from or chained to the cycle of birth and death, is not explicitly considered, though there are a few references to Yam as a netherworld destination for the sinner, a site referred to in Hindu literature. What heaven is like is largely undefined. It appears that people do go there together in groups, but besides being a place where one enjoys the constant bliss of God-intoxication and one is united with God, few other details are provided.

A brief explanation should be given as to the precise meaning of "the Name." Very often the Name, *Sat Nam*, becomes synonymous with a related term used by Nanak, *Sabad*, or the Word. *Sabad* is very much like the Greek *Logos*. In the *Japji*, Nanak explains: "Whatever He has made is an expression of His Name. There is no part of creation which is not such an expression."²⁰ In no wise is the Name to be associated with the radically different *names* of God, i.e., Hari, Ram, Allah, Jehovah, etc. On a different level the Name is virtually analagous with Truth. In one Sikh scholar's words: "the Name is the total expression of all that God is and this is Truth. Sati-Nam—His Name is Truth."²¹

As for the nature and mission of the Guru, the Sikh doctrine is quite self-evident. Dr. Bhai Jodh Singh in his 1936 exposition of Sikh theology²² says, "All of the human gurus who roam around nowadays have taken instruction from some person or another. Guru Nanak's *Guru*, however, was not a person. As Nanak declared, 'He who is the infinite, supreme God is the Guru Nanak has met.'²³ Ordinarily however, the Guru is a communicator of

¹⁹ Ibid, p. 184.

²⁰ Ibid. p. 196.

²¹ McLeod's words, in Ibid. p. 196.

²² Gurnwti Nirnay, or Exposition of the Sikh Religion, Lahore, 1936.

²³ McLeod's translation of Jodh Singh's words, Ibid, p. 198.

divine truth, a guide and exemplar. No Guru, however, is ever to be confused with God or called a divine incarnation. In Guru Gobind Singh's words: "God is immovable, imperishable, how can he obtain a body?" "Those who call me the Supreme Being shall fall into the pit of hell."²⁴

Here too, unfortunately, the actuality is different from Nanak's ideal and Gobind's protests.²⁵ In the short space of sixty years Nanak was elevated to not only a worker of stupendous miracles but the Supreme God Himself. "Guru Nanak is God, the Supreme Brahma." (Gurdas, 13:25)26

The ethics of Sikhism embody the practical application of its theology. The true Sikh, Bhai Jodh Singh tells us, uses no tobacco, hemp, opium, intoxicants, and eats no meat—beef or pork. Sikhism is monotheistic and the Sikh himself is monogamous. Nanak was particularly emphatic about the equality and rights of women, a fact which is reflected today in the proportionately higher percentage of literacy and education among Sikh women in India compared to those of other sects. Nanak put it incisively enough when he said, "How can she be called inferior who begets Kings?"²⁷ Sikhs are taught to consider all women as their mothers, sisters and daughters, and to be content with one wife. There is neither reason for the "veil" of Islam nor the *sari* of Hinduism. Sikh women are neither betrothed in infancy nor married before maturity.

Sikhs repudiate the notion of caste. The story is told of Nanak visiting a certain village, the proprietor of which, on hearing of Nanak's visit, sent invitations to Hindus "of all castes" to attend a feast in Nanak's honor. Nanak, however, declined the invitation, giving as his reason the fact that he didn't belong to any particular "caste." Jodh Singh reaffirms Nanak's belief that caste is accidental and of no importance. When Indians are baptized into the

²⁴ Mehervan Singh, *Sikhism: its Impact*, Chopmen Enterprises, Singapore, 1973, p. 28.

²⁵ "In the East," says Macauliffe, "the progress from the homage paid to a religious teacher to his deification is tempting and easy." (*Ibid.*, p. 280).

²⁶ Macauliffe, *Life of Guru Nanak*, pp. 280-281.
p. 31.

community of Sat Nam in the ritual called *pahul*, they brazenly "break caste" by sitting together on common platforms, by eating and drinking from common vessels, and by putting food in each other's mouths. Something innocent enough to Westerners, but in a society with a strict caste structure, quite appalling.

When Sikhs are not saints, and virtue of a peaceful sort fails, they become warriors. A faith that is caught between two larger religions has no choice but to learn to defend itself. Had Sikhism not begun this early in its tradition, it scarcely could have survived the stormy centuries that have ensued. Thus the Sikh is willing and ready to bear arms for his self-protection. And apparently quite effectively so, for the Sikh soldier has become renowned in modern history for his bravery. One modern Sikh expositor claims that their warriors rank with the Scots and Gurkhas in both their valor and fortitude.²⁸ A true Sikh will let his body be cut to pieces when fighting for his master and considers dying in battle a means of salvation.

III. SIKHISM IN THE MODERN WORLD

The Khalsa

One may ask how the Sikhism of the wandering minstrel and meditative Nanak becomes a militant community of soldiers. In part this came about because of their political and religious environment.

The famed martial character of the Sikhs was perfected by the tenth Guru, Gobind Singh. Though none of the first five Gurus ever themselves bore arms, the sixth Guru Har Gobind, to secure power, had to slay two rivals for his office. In addition, by his time mutual antagonism between Sikhs and Muslims was well established. Thus one of his earliest official orders was to command alms collectors to gather in "arms and horses as well as money." His son, Teg Bahadur, the ninth Guru, had a name derived from Punjabi words meaning "Sword Hero." Living up to his name he was a bold, aggressive person and surrounded himself with many

²⁸ Mehervan Singh, *Ibid*, p. 58.

¹ Archer, *Ibid*, p. 173.

thousand war-like men to insure the successful completion of his work. Unfortunately, he was to come up against Emperor Aurangzeb, who beheaded him, quartered his body and hung a portion at each of the city's four gates. ²

This act preceded the assumption of the guruship by Guru Gobind Singh. Without going into detail concerning his life, it is sufficient to ponder what effect the fate of his predecessor—who was also his father—may have had upon him. Whatever his motivation, he took a step which, as one scholar notes ³, was the third of three key events that assured the existence of Sikhism as a distinct religion and molded the body of Sikhs into the compact society that they are today. This crucial decision was the formation of the *Khalsa*. It equals in significance the formal designation of a successor by Nanak and the idea to canonize their scripture by the fifth Guru, Arjan.

Gobind Singh became a champion of the lowly peoples of North India and an irreconcilable foe of Muslim rule. With his wife Jita, who shared his hatred of the Mughuls, but who also shared his intelligence and loyalty to the Sikh cause, giving him "capable support in attention to community affairs and herself set a prominent example for all Sikh women" ⁴, he set out to establish a permanent and effective order, the Khalsa.

In 1695 Aurangzeb's Mughul empire was beginning to fall apart; his own two sons rebelled against him and Hindus from the south had won some victories. At this time Gobind Singh wanted to take action against the Muslims, moving out of the hills where he and his Sikh movement had retreated. Gobind was about forty then, "with an enhanced sense of divine assistance in his discharge of sacred duty, and enjoying the confidence of a large following and general public." ⁵ At a spring festival, Gobind assembled all the Sikhs. He proclaimed that Durga, the great Hindu mother goddess, was bestowing her blessing on him in a new enterprise.

² Archer, *Ibid*, p. 185. At least according to the Muslim account which many Sikhs accept. For an objective discussion of each of the Guru's lives and trials, cf. pp. 134-220.

³ Cf. McLeod, *Ibid*. pp. 1-2 for an expanded discussion.

Archer, *Ibid*, p. 188.

⁴ Archer, *Ibid*, p. 191.

(Sikhs had for years been accustomed to, and thus were not surprised by, such relapses into Hinduism.) However, Durga required blood sacrifices to insure the success of the Guru's cause. Said Gobind, as he drew from its scabbard his martyred Father's blade, "Is there a Sikh who will offer his life?" After an intense silence, and Gobind's third appeal, five men, one by one, stepped forward. Gobind took them into his tent, and after each entered, the crowd heard the cry "Ya Durga" and the thud of the falling blade. And on each occasion Gobind emerged from the tent holding his blade dripping with blood. "The bystanders were at first awe-struck, soon many trembled in great anxiety and at the last some fled in mortal terror. But the solemn rite was slowly executed, and five loyal Sikhs, apparently, had gone to death as willing victims to Durga's pleasure. Then it was that Gobind spoke again with reassurance to the company, and turning to the tent called the five men out again—who came out at once to meet a still wondering but transformed audience. . . the blood was goat's blood, an animal dear to Durga as an offering, and the five willing, would-be victims were yet alive, to live as influential heroes wherever the Sikh cause led."⁶

These five men became "the immortal nucleus of the Khalsa," the new Sikh nation. In addition to this unifying sacrifice, Gobind initiated five other visible conditions to bind the community as a unique people: one, the institution of a baptismal rite (*pahul*); two, the mass assumption of a new name, *Singh*, meaning "lion"; three, the tangible symbols of membership, the *Kakkas* (unshorn hair and beard, a comb carried in the hair, the wearing of shorts, a steel bangle worn on the right wrist, carrying a sword); four, a communion rite in which Sikhs "broke caste" by sipping a solution of nectar (which, in the original *pahul* of 1695 was stirred by Gobind with his dagger, as he chanted verses of *the Japji* and his wife Jita threw in some sweets for good measure); and five, a managing committee, *puachayat*, set up to rule the Khalsa.

In addition to their holy book, these recognizable insignia,

Archer, *Ibid.* p. 193.

especially the uncut hair, preserved Sikhism, it is said, "from irrevocable dissolution."⁷ Whether this be the case or not, the destiny of the Sikhs was yet to be very stormy, and in spite of Gobind's offering to Durga, he saw no victory in his campaign against the Mughuls. Banda, Gobind's follower, continued the struggle until he and the Sikh revolt were "suppressed with great severity" in 1715.⁸

By this time, it was thought that the Sikhs had been "hammered out of existence." Yet all "the hammering did not in fact reduce them to pulp, but hardened a remnant to tempered steel."⁹ Those who remained after the execution of Banda, fled into the Punjab hills, to be ever more united by a distinct doctrine and ritual which "made them look upon themselves as a Chosen People" and "underlined their separateness both to themselves and others."¹⁰

Decades passed, but when time and circumstance were propitious, the Sikhs produced their next great leader, Ranjit Singh, who took the title of Maharaj, but claimed no more than to be General of the Khalsa. It should be mentioned that the great division among Sikhs today is between the Singhs, members of the Khalsa, and those who, though following Nanak, bear none of the outward signs of the Khalsa and externally at least blend in with the Hindus. Nevertheless, all Sikhs share a communal consciousness.

Ranjit Singh displayed the qualities of a successful political leader, and it was he who brought Sikhism to its highest pinnacle of power. When he died in 1839, though he had been prevented by further conquests in the west by Muslims in Afghanistan and in the south by the British, he "was the undisputed master of a compact and well-knit kingdom possessing the only army in India capable of meeting the Company's forces (British) on equal terms."¹¹

McLeod. *Ibid.*, p. 3.

⁷ Percival Spear, *The Oxford History of Modern India*, Oxford Univ. Press, Oxford, 1965, p. 166.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 166.

⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 166-167.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 168.

What made Ranjit Singh one of the two "most remarkable Indians of their generation"?" "To an average military skill he united a diplomatic guile which even the tangled politics of the time rarely produced. . . . He had an Elizabethan faculty for bemusing both friends and foes as to his real intentions. Very shrewd in his assessment of character, he knew whom to trust and when and how far. He was able to make all hopes and fears revolve around himself; he never allowed any one man a position of dominating power, nor drove anyone to acts of desperation or despair. He balanced individuals and communities against each other with uncanny skill." But unfortunately for the Sikhs his death signalled the rapid collapse of the Sikh state and the onset of Sikh anarchy and the Sikh wars." Ranjit Singh's sons met gruesome fates. One son was murdered in 1840, another died accidentally the next day. A third reputed son succeeded to power only to be murdered in late 1843. Tumult ensued in the state and in the army until "like many unsteady regimes, the Sikh government had the choice of war or internal turmoil and it chose war." An attack on the British was unsuccessful. After desperate fighting, and faulty generalship on both sides, by 1846 the Sikh state lay prostrate.

Sikh Sects

"The Sikhs have had their share of messiahs; the messianic pattern, however, was Sikh-oriented. The Gurus had assured their disciples that no one could attain salvation without the mediation of a teacher. Consequently Gobind Singh's declaration that the line of human gurus was at an end and thereafter the Sikhs should look for guidance to the *A di Granth* was ignored by many of the succeeding generations. . . .¹¹⁴

¹² Ibid, p. 168. The other was Ram Mohun Roy, founder of the Brahmo Samaj.

¹³ "Ranjit Singh was like a massive banyan tree which cast its shadow over the whole of the Punjab; and like the banyan he had sheltered the land beneath him to such an extent that nothing but weeds could thrive on it. Consequently, when he died there was no one of sufficient stature to step into his shoes and guide the destinies of the state." Khushwant Singh, Ibid, vol. 2, p. 3.

¹⁴ Khushwant Singh, A History of the Sikhs, Princeton Univ. Press, Princeton, 1966, p. 121.

During the reign of Maharajah Ranjit Singh, Hindus of the western Punjab were influenced by Sikhism; a few accepted *pahul* and joined the Khalsa. Others attended the temples and read the *Granth* but still described themselves as Hindus. Dyal Das (d. 1855) belonged to this Sikh-Hindu community and after declaring himself a *nirankari*—*follower* of the "formless" Creator—he abandoned his career as a gold merchant, established himself as a guru and gathered disciples. The Nirankaris, as they called themselves, were ostracized by both Sikhs and Hindus and thus were forced to build their own places of worship. When Dyal Das died, "his sandals became an object of veneration" and "were placed on an altar alongside the *Granth*" in the temple which became the Nirankari headquarters.¹⁵ Dyal Das' son subsequently took over the leadership and besides initiating the practice of issuing "encyclicals," he standardized the rites associated with births, marriages and deaths. The 1891 census recorded the number of Nirankaris as about fifty thousand—12,000 Sikhs, 39,000 Hindus.¹⁶ The number remains about the same today although "the Nirankaris are fast losing their separate identity, and may, within a few decades, merge back into the Hindu or Sikh parent body."¹⁷ The two chief distinctions between them and orthodox Sikhism are their worship of Gurus other than the original ten and their disapproval of the militant Khalsa.

The Radha Soamis were founded by a Hindu banker, Shiv Dayal (1818-1878). Contrary to orthodox Sikhism, they believe that to reach perfection one must have a living guru. *Radha* refers to the soul; *Soami* to the Master; those who have been initiated into this sect thereupon greet each other with the words "*radha-soami*." Shiv Dayal, though accepting elements of Hinduism, was heavily influenced by the *Adi Granth* and began a succession of all-Sikh gurus. In the 1960s, under the leadership of a charismatic, educated man named Charan Singh this community has grown sizably, so that usually at least 100,000 followers gather at assemblies celebrating the birthdays of their gurus. Their appeal is

Khushwant Singh, *Ibid.*, p. 124.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 124.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 125.

significant for the educated classes, especially those with some combination of Sikhism and Hinduism in their background. Their temples do not hold the *Granth*, but instead there is a lecture platform for the guru. Like the Nirankaris, they reject the Khalsa, accepting only the writings of the first five gurus in the *Adi Granth*.

The Namdhari sect was founded by Balak Singh but took on a more distinct identity under his chosen successor, Ram Singh. Besides instituting changes in worship and personal appearance, he exhorted his followers to chant hymns, and like dervishes or Sufis, work themselves into a frenzied state, whereupon they would emit loud shrieks (*Kuks*). Thus they came to be known as the Kuka movement.

After a time Ram Singh's group began to take on political overtones. In 1863 when he had a well-knit following of several thousand, writings were circulated that "prophesied the rebirth of Guru Gobind Singh in the person of one Ram Singh, carpenter of village Bhaini, who would resurrect the Khalsa, drive the English out of Hindustan, and establish a new Sikh dynasty."¹⁸ However, their subsequent militancy tended to alienate them from the Sikh community at large. Kuka fanatics, inflamed by Ram Singh's fervent protection of the cow, murdered poor Muslim butchers in two cities in 1871 and later ran afoul of the British in 1872 by an attempted uprising. Both times Kukas were sentenced and executed. Though Kuka hatred of the white colonizers appealed to some Sikhs, the majority sided with the British. Ram Singh landed in jail for awhile, but he continued to make his poorly-educated followers feel as if they were the elect—on the verge of triumph. Thus, while imprisoned, he wrote predicting a Russian invasion of India and the establishment of his dynasty. When this did not materialize, he made it clear he was not to be called a guru and he began invoking, as an additional help to his cause, the Hindu goddesses of destruction.¹⁹

Today the Kukas are a distinct community who "only on rare occasions deign to join Sikh religious processions."²⁰ Despite

¹⁸ /bid, p. 130.

¹⁹ /bid, p. 134.

²⁰ /bid, p. 135.

their past politics, they adhere much more strictly to the austere faith of Nanak and Gobind than the parent community. Their temples are simple and lack the idolatrous practices of canopies and coverings for the *Granth*, etc. , that mark other Sikh houses of worship. They also dress simply, have a rigid code of conduct and were the first in the freedom movement of India to use the type of non-cooperation (evolved by Ram Singh in the 1860's) that was taken up so successfully later by Gandhi.

However sincere their intentions and valid their cause, all three movements—the Nirankari, the Radha Soami and the Kukas—failed to go beyond their own individual gurus and distinctive rituals to make a lasting impact on the greater body of Sikhism. They shared the fate of other Sikh sects²¹ that arose at a particular time only to disappear, or to blend into the Indian spiritual scene. Nevertheless, an effort to reverse the serious decline in the moral standards and doctrinal purity of 19th century Sikhism was needed.

It was left for the Singh Sabha to do really significant reforming work. Their task was two-fold: on the one side they had to help Sikhs adapt to British control of India; and on the other, they had to protect themselves from the preaching of Christian missionaries and the dynamic Hindu Arya Samajists. Maharajah Dalip Singh, the leader of the Sikhs in the Punjab, was converted to Christianity, the first of many to join the churches. The four thousand Christians who were registered in the Punjab census of 1881 grew to 415,000 in 1931²², mostly from the lower uneducated classes. Renascent Hinduism, however, posed a far greater threat than the Christians. In 1877, the founder of the Arya Samaj came to the Punjab and set up his first center at Lahore. Though he was welcomed by and even gained many Sikh adherents it did not take long for them to see the writing on the wall.²³

²¹ Cf. Archer, *Ibid.*, pp. 221-237.

²² Khushwant Singh, *Ibid.* p. 137.

²³ As Muslims and Christians at that time were doing, Sikhs took action to suppress the Arya Samaj leader Dayanand's book. Dayanand maligned the prophets of all three faiths. He denounced Nanak as a hypocrite. Because of their ignorance of Sanskrit he said the Sikhs were men of little learning and that the *Granth* was of secondary importance. To Dayanand, the Vedas were all: "By the most incredible interpretations Swami Dayanand succeeded in

The Singh Sabha was a group originally formed to counter the influence of another Hindu orator who had made derogatory remarks about the Sikh gurus. The group was reactivated to protest the activities of the Arya Samaj. The British governors and English well-wishers worked with the Singh Sabha and the organization became involved not only in matters of religion but took on problems of education, literature, and politics as well. They founded schools where the teaching of Gurmukhi and the Sikh scriptures was compulsory. Sikhs were also stimulated to publish books, magazines, tracts and newspapers.

The Singh Sabha movement for a time effectively checked the Arya Samaj and stopped the flow of Sikhs back to Hinduism. But more than that, it went ahead with vigorous proselytisation on its own and large numbers of Hindus from the Punjab and Sindh were baptized into the Khalsa. Ironically, the tactic of the Arya Samajists to maintain that the Sikhs were part of the Hindu community only caused the Sikhs to affirm much more strongly their distinct and separate faith. In other words, the Arya Samaj forced the Sikhs further away from Hinduism. Though the Singh Sabha declined in the 1920's, the defensive attitude of Sikhs towards Hindus persisted.

An Uncertain Future

Today Sikhs are a tiny island in a sea of Hinduism. But even worse, in Radhakrishnan's words, "the barriers which the Sikh Guru laboured to cast down are again being re-created. Many pernicious practices against which they revolted are creeping into Sikh society. Worldly considerations are corrupting the great ideals."²⁴

Though this backsliding is by no means something new, today it could aggravate other factors which stand in the way of Sikhism's renewal. At certain times during Muslim rule there was a

persuading himself and others that everything worth knowing, even the most recent inventions of modern science, were alluded to in the Vedas. Steam-engines, railways and steam boats, were all known to have been known, at least in their germ, to the poets of the Vedas; for veda, he argued, means knowledge, and how could anything be hid from that?" (Max Muller, *Biographical Essays*, ii., Scribner's, N.Y., 1884, p. 170.)

²⁴ From his introduction in *Selections from the Sacred Writings of the Sikhs*, p. 24.

price on the head of every Sikh. Muslims and Hindus have almost continually sought to absorb or annihilate the followers of Nanak. Sikhs suffered a particularly disappointing period after the fall of Ranjit Singh and the annexation of the Punjab by the British in the mid-nineteenth century. More recently was the partition of India into a Muslim state and a predominantly Hindu India. This was a treacherous time for Sikhs for three reasons. First, they had enjoyed a special status with the British, who often used Sikh soldiers and police to deal with unruly elements within and without India. In World War I, the Sikh contribution in men and material was larger than any other in India. Though the British let them down on several occasions,²⁵ Sikhs stood to lose most when the British left.

Secondly, the Punjab was sliced up so that the greater part went under the Muslim rule. That meant that Sikhs had to abandon their land, their homes and their shrines and start all over in India. Their treatment by the new Indian government seemed to be unfair. But it is to the Sikhs' credit that even though they often had to begin anew with nothing, one never saw, in a land of beggars, a Sikh with his hand stretched out. In a remarkably short time Sikhs established themselves, though in a considerably diminished territory and unsettled situation.

Third, partition was effected without setting aside a Sikh homeland. The Muslims had Pakistan. The Hindus had Hindustan. Why should not the Sikhs have their own nation? For Khushwant Singh, this is the critical factor. If the Sikhs are not allowed to form a separate state, as several Sikh parties propose²⁶, then the very scattering of Sikhs with other people will cause them to decline in numbers. The pressure for younger Sikhs to cut their hair and beards, and ignore the other traditions of the Khalsa, especially among the educated classes, will be too great. This has already proven to be the case in certain Hindu communities in India, as

²⁵ The British failed to recognize adequately the Sikhs for their war effort. They also failed to help the Sikhs in their protest against American and Canadian maltreatment of Sikh immigrants. The racial discrimination Sikhs encountered in the West turned many for a time in the direction of Marxism. Cf. Khushwant Singh, *Ibid*, "Xenophobic Marxism", pp. 168-192.

²⁶ The Akali Das drew up a detailed plan. Cf. Khushwant Singh, *Ibid*. p. 302.

well as among Sikhs in England, Canada, and America, three countries to which Sikhs emigrated at the turn of the century." In other countries, where the Sikh community is self-enclosed, apostasy is lessened: in Malaya or East Africa, for example.

Furthermore, practices by the new Indian government tend to work to the detriment of Sikh cohesion. Elimination of *pahul* in the army, replacement of Punjabi by Hindi or English in official and semi-official usage, emphasis on Sanskrit, Hindi and the Aryan classics, and the formation of numerous cow-protection societies all tend to lessen observance of Sikh ritual.

In Khushwant Singh's words, "the only chance of survival of the Sikhs as a separate community is to create a state in which they form a compact group, where the teaching of Gurmukhi and the Sikh religion is compulsory, and where there is an atmosphere of respect for the traditions of their Khalsa forefathers." However, many Indians argue that a secular Republic already guarantees full religious freedom to minorities and that if a separate Sikh state were allowed, several other large minorities (e.g. the Tamil and the Kashmiris) would likewise rightfully demand full autonomy.

Nevertheless, one should not ignore the fact that the Sikh Khalsa has played a role beyond their numbers. There once was a time when power was not counted by the number of heads, but by property and prowess. Toynbee, in his foreword to the new UNESCO translation of *Adi Granth*, remarks, "To have discovered and embraced the deep harmony underlying the historic Hindu-Muslim discord has been a noble spiritual triumph; and Sikhs may well be proud of their religion's ethos and origin."²⁸

²⁷ Sikh communities also sprang up in Burma, Malaya, Singapore, Thailand, Cambodia, the Phillipines and China. These often began by young Sikhs seeking their fortunes.

²⁸ A. Toynbee in "Foreword" to *Selections from the Sacred Writings of the Sikhs*, pp. 9-10.

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