

## **Who Are Sikhs? What is Sikhism?**

The Sikh religion was founded in South Asia over 500 years ago. There are more than 25 million Sikhs throughout the world and approximately 500,000 adherents of the Sikh religion in the United States.

Sikhs believe in one God. There are 3 core tenets to the religion: devotion to God, truthful living, and service to humanity. Sikhs are meant to uphold the values of honesty, compassion, generosity, humility, integrity and spirituality on a daily basis.

Two other central values are the importance of equality – among people of all backgrounds, and between men and women – and the importance of standing up for justice for all people.

Sikhs get their teachings from a Guru which means enlightener. Today Sikhs consider both their religious scripture and their community of initiated Sikhs to be their present-day Guru.

## **Turbans and Hair**

Sikhs who are initiated (and many who are not yet initiated) maintain an external uniform to unify and bind them to the beliefs of the religion and to remind them of their commitment to the Sikh principles at all times. This uniform consists of the five articles of faith. They are: 1) *Kesh* (uncut hair), which is kept covered by a distinctive turban, 2) the *Kirpan* (religious sword), 3) *Kara* (metal bracelet), 4) *Kanga* (comb) and 5) *Kachera* (under-shorts). Together these articles of faith are similar to a police officer's uniform. They remind Sikhs of their spiritual obligations and make this commitment public.

Sikh men are religiously-mandated to wear *dastaars* (Sikh turbans) over their unshorn hair. Sikh women are also religiously-mandated to maintain uncut hair. The act of tying a turban is both an internal and external reminder to act according to Sikh values: honesty, integrity, the pursuit of justice, and equality for all. All practicing Sikhs wear the turban out of love, as a mark of commitment to the faith, and so they can be easily identified as a Sikh.

## **Turbans Are Targeted**

Sikh Americans are part of the American fabric, from coast to coast, working in every profession, serving in our armed forces, and holding important positions in American political and civic life. Even still, Sikh Americans continue to experience hate crimes, job discrimination, school bullying, and racial profiling.

Sikhism and American values are very similar – religious freedom, justice and equality for all, working hard, honesty, integrity, and service to your community. The act of tying a turban is both an internal and external reminder to act according to Sikh values.

It is tragic that the turban, which stands for love and justice, is the very reason why Sikhs have been the targets of hate and discrimination.

### **Moving Forward**

We need a dialogue on religious pluralism and not just to tolerate each other, but appreciate and respect each other. We need to respect each other for our differences and for our nation's rich diversity, a nation which Sikhs are very proud to be a part of.

When speaking about Sikhism, please keep the following in mind:

Questions:

- If someone asks, “are Sikhs being targeted because they are Muslims?” or “why are Sikhs targeted? Is it because they are being perceived as Muslim?” don't get trapped in responding in a way inconsistent with Sikh values. Say, “In post-9/11 America, many religious groups--Sikhs, Muslims, South Asians, and other minorities--have been wrongfully targeted in hate crimes. Attacking any religious group is wrong. As per Sikh values, an attack on one of us is an attack on all of us.” DO NOT say, “Sikhs aren't Muslims.” That makes it seem like Muslims, not Sikhs, should be targeted. We would never want anyone to have this wrong impression of Sikhs and our spiritual heritage.
- Do not focus on topics that can deviate from the main message of education, respect, and open dialogue and acceptance of diversity. For example, gun control, current election topics, etc.

Say:

- Sikhism is the fifth largest world religion.
- Sikhism was founded in 1469 by Guru Nanak in South Asia. Its core beliefs were shaped by Guru Nanak and his nine successors during the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries.
- With over 25 million followers worldwide, it is one of the youngest major world religions.
- There are over 500,000 Sikhs living in the U.S. today.
- Sikhism is a distinct, independent religion. Not a branch or blend of any other faith.
- In America, 99% of the people you see wearing a turban will be Sikh.
- Sikhs have been in this country for more than 100 years and have contributed to this country's growth and development ever since. Sikh Americans have had notable achievements as farmers, entrepreneurs, congressmen, scientists, scholars, and actors, among countless other professions. The largest federal court security contractor for the US Marshals Service is a Sikh-American owned company. The

inventor of fiber optics is a Sikh-American. America's largest peach grower is a Sikh-American. And last but not least, one of the first doctors to arrive on the scene to treat victims at ground zero, and indeed a true hero of 9/11, is a Sikh-American.

Don'ts:

- Do not say Seek or Seekh. Say Sikh. Sikh is pronounced sik-kh ("kh" should be pronounced as in Mikhail).
- Do not use temple or church when referring to a *gurdwara*. A Sikh house of worship and learning is **only** to be referred to as a *gurdwara*. Remember that American Jews call their house of worship a synagogue, American Christians a church and American Muslims a mosque. It is equally accurate and appropriate for American Sikhs to use the word *gurdwara* to describe our place of worship. With continued use, the word *gurdwara* will become as recognizable as church, synagogue or mosque. Please note: If your *gurdwara's* official name is Sikh Temple of X, please explain that while the official title might say temple, the actual name for this place is *gurdwara*, and Sikhs prefer the term *gurdwara*.
- Do not say the *Guru Granth Sahib* is a book. Explain that the *Guru Granth Sahib* is our present-day Guru and religious scripture.
- Do not refer to the *kirpan*, or any of the *kakaars* as symbols. The *kakaars* as well as the turban are Sikh articles of faith.
- Do not say the *kirpan* is a knife or dagger. The *kirpan* is to be referred to as a sword, or religious sword.
- Do not say *kirpans* are always less than "X" inches. Guru Sahib did not prescribe a certain length to the *kirpan*, but you can say that most, but not all *kirpans*, are commonly between 3 and 5 inches.
- Do not say *amritdhari* Sikhs are baptized or orthodox Sikhs. Sikhs that have taken part in the *amrit sanchaar* ceremony are to be described as initiated Sikhs or Sikhs that have taken the commitment ceremony.