

Who is a Sikh?

Definitions of Sikhism

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ABSTRACT

There is not now, nor has there ever been any single definition of a Sikh, if such definition is bound within any particulars of time or place. The basis of all devotion to that which is Infinite is the sense of simultaneous wonder and humility at the human condition. Within it lie the paradoxes of our physical and spiritual identity, our limitations and our limitlessness. When we define, we wish to contain that which is being defined within the scope of those words. When we choose to define Sikhism based upon our limitations, we invariably divide and exclude whole parts of the community based upon certain dogmas that recognize parts of the truth but neglect other truths. When we choose to define based upon our limitlessness, we align our own true nature with the limitless nature of Akal Purakh (The Timeless Being). This is the path of inclusion, the path of love and the path of undivided truth. Such a definition is much more difficult to arrive at, for it demands, not a definition of words but one of individual transformation and action. In the end, this is the only definition, which serves us to act with, rather than against, the Hukm (Law) of Akal Purakh. I say this because it evolves from unconditional love and seeks all truth. It is this perspective alone which can return us to an awareness of our true spiritual nature in ascendance over our physical state. This was the message of our Guru.

INTRODUCTION

In the months and years to come, we will be joining one another upon a journey of exploration. We will be exploring an issue, which we have heard much about, yet seem to be unable to incorporate within the life of our community. The issue is of course *Sikhi* (Sikhism) itself. The issue of Sikh identity is a complex one. It has seen many changes in the past and it is encountering forces of change in the present. Any discussion of Sikhism is often charged with emotion and it seems that it is easy to offend when the topic is brought up for discussion. I believe that it is this dimension of the discussion, which often leads us to avoid it altogether. That is unfortunate because it is this fear of offence, which prevents us from engaging in true *vichar* (deliberation/discussion), and there can be no *Satsangat* (congregation founded upon a focus on Undivided Truth) without *vichar*. So we must take first things first and decide who we are. We must, if we are to proceed in the direction of Truth as a community, be truthful with one another in our thoughts. Only then can we proceed in constructing a community that can reflect the *Sat* (Truth) of *Satguru* (True Guru). So let us begin and ask the first

question that we must ask both as individuals and as a community: "What does it mean to be a Sikh?"

DEFINING A SIKH

Ordinarily, the discussion of this question would begin with several previous definitions as well as the etymology of the word itself. Since this is not an ordinary question, however, we will not begin ordinarily. Let us start, then, upon common ground. I believe that it is safe to assume that we can all agree upon the central position of "Truth" in the definition of a Sikh. It is clear that after *Ik Oankar* it is the relation of *Sat* to *Naam*, which is most relevant in *Jap* [2]. The nature of the relationship to truth is further explored and defined: "By meeting the True Guru, truth is realized and by becoming truthful, man is absorbed in the True Lord." [3], "Those who are imbued with Truth meet the True Guru." [4]. In the light of truth, we must always ask the reason for the inquiry before we pursue the answer to the question itself. So let us begin by asking why the question is asked. Why do we wish to know what it means to be a Sikh?

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The thought that underlies the inquiry into a definition of Sikhism

is generally religious or it is intellectual. If we identify ourselves with either of these groups, we are likely to reject the very reason for the inquiry itself. Either we will conclude that the attempt at definition is an attempt to divide the community or we will conclude that the writer is simply fulfilling his or her need to express their religious zeal without regard to the truth. These perspectives may look to be opposite to one another but in reality they are only the opposite sides of the same coin. They both take the religious view. One is simply standing inside of the religion and appreciating its familiarity. The other is standing outside of the religion, attempting to objectively dissect and describe it. They are both equally fixated upon Sikhism as a religion. But is this the only perspective from which to approach the question? I do not believe that it is. I believe that there is another point of view that has not as yet been taken and it is to this view that I wish to direct the reader's attention.

That perspective is the perspective of *Akal Purakh* (The Timeless Being). Now that may sound presumptuous to some but only because of our own misunderstanding of the message of the Gurus. You may say: "who is this writer to suggest that he might write from the perspective of *Akal Purakh*?" I can only respond that it is not my reply, which I will echo but that of *Satguru* as expressed to us through *Aad Guru Granth Sahib* (AGGS) [1]. That message in fact urges us to take the perspective of *Akal Purakh* in all of our affairs. It commends us to make the Eternal perspective our own perspective and to do so constantly. "He within whose heart is the Lord's meditation (*simran*), deem that man to be emancipated. Nanak says, between that man and the Lord there is no difference. Accept this as true." [5]. What I would like to explore in the remainder of this inquiry is neither the traditional definition of Sikhism nor the intellectual definition. These concern themselves with a religion and have been amply expounded upon by individuals much more learned than I. I would like to propose a definition of Sikhism (and of a Sikh) which is not tied to time or to place. It is the definition of a Sikh that has been provided to us by our Gurus from the only reliable source of our Gurus' message: *Aad Guru Granth Sahib* [1]. We will close with a comparison of this definition of Sikhism to the definition of Sikhism as a religion.

What, then, are the elements of the definition of Sikhism from the perspective of the Gurus in their writings as compiled in AGGS? The definition begins with the understanding of the unity of the believer with the Eternal (*Akal Purakh*) as noted above. It extends to the spiritual unity of the individual with all other

individuals: "He, who becomes as humble as the dust on everyone's feet, discerns the presence of the Lord's Name (*Naam*) in every heart." [6]. So, to begin, a Sikh is fundamentally aware of the spiritual Unity of all beings within *Akal Purakh* and is instructed to focus upon this Unity in all of her or his doings. The focus is first, always internal: "He who enshrines *Naam* in his heart, who sees the Lord amongst all and who at every moment bows to the Lord, Nanak says, such an undefiled saint emancipates all." [7]. Unity is of both the individual with the Eternal and of the person with all other persons (not just with those persons who may belong to the same "religion"). It is from this perspective that we can see the first discrepancy between this definition of Sikhism and the traditional view of Sikhism as a religion. Any religious perspective creates the situation of those within the religion and those outside of the religion. The creation of a religion is in this sense, disunitive. It rejects the unity of all persons and states that such a person is part of me and my world and such another person is not of my world. It is in this way that we divorce ourselves from the Unity of *Akal Purakh* and indeed from the Eternal Itself. It is this act of exclusion that opens the door to enmity and all that it entails. Once we separate ourselves spiritually from another, how can we hope to understand and incorporate *Satguru's* impartiality? It is a short step from exclusion to condemnation and from there to enmity. "As long as we deem one person an enemy and another a friend, so long we will not find peace of mind." [8].

THE HUKM OF AKAL PURAKH (The Laws of Nature/Almighty)

What is the world-view of the Gurus? It is not the world-view within which any religion operates, because all religions divide and The Eternal unifies, for The Eternal sees all with the same eyes because it is all people in all places at all times. "Nothing is apart from You. You permeate all land and space." [9]. All worlds have their laws. In the world of divided communities, those laws are the laws of community, family, country, social class, etc. These are our realities. They are realities of our own making. In the World of the Gurus there are also Laws. The summation of these Laws is the *Hukm* of *Akal Purakh* and it invests all of Reality. These Laws are of no one's making. They are eternal and unchanging. Indeed, everything operates within these Laws. "Truly the entire creation – everything – follows Your Will (Law)." [10]. "Suffering and joy come from the One, so abandon all else and contemplate the One [11]. In reality, the *Hukm* of *Akal Purakh* is very much active in our divided world. In fact it is our failure in constructing our temporal reality in harmony with the

Eternal Reality that leads us to division, animosity and all imbalance of personality that result in sorrow. It can stop as soon as we all wish for it to stop and choose to construct a reality, which reflects The Eternal Reality. It is for the purpose of experiencing this separation, learning about the *Hukm* and making our choices that we are here. Whatever we choose, it cannot be outside the *Hukm*. Our choices can only be congruent or incongruent with the *Hukm* of *Akal Purakh*. We are like fish in a river. We cannot leave the river but we can choose to swim with the current or against it. "All are within the *Hukm*, none stand apart. Says Nanak, by recognizing the *Hukm*, we silence our ego." [12]. "Good and bad deeds are all disclosed in the presence of righteousness. Our actions take us near or far. Those who dwell in the *Naam* earn true success." [13]. Let us then explore the *Hukm*. Any exploration will be partial for the *Hukm* of *Akal Purakh* is beyond our comprehension in Its entirety. It is fully available to us, however, to the extent that we need know It. It will serve us to simply highlight several of It's most prominent features. Were we to embody these alone, we would obtain an enlightened union with the Eternal. These noted may be few but they are all interconnected and they are the doors to all further revelation of the *Hukm* of *Akal Purakh*.

The exploration of these aspects of the *Hukm* are perhaps best examined as attributes of a Sikh from the perspective of the Eternal I have sought to outline above. Let us first recall that from this perspective, a Sikh and *Satguru* are one and the same. "Says Nanak, between You and your devotees, no difference lies." [14]. This being understood, we can begin to see AGGS as more than the wonderful exposition upon the nature of the Almighty that it is. It now also becomes a blueprint for the nature of the individual who seeks union with the Infinite. To become the same as the Almighty is to become the perfect devotee of the Eternal. To become the perfect devotee is to reflect the attributes of the Almighty Itself. Let us see then what such an individual might be like. Only if we can envision such a person can we become that person. This was the purpose of the succession of Gurus: to embody the Infinite and to model for us the attributes of the perfect devotee. They were at once different and yet the same. Externally different and internally the same. We need only recognize that we are internally the same as they and we too can become perfect devotees. To think ourselves less than the Absolute Itself is the only true blasphemy. Remember "You yourself are the One,

You yourself are the many, You are immortal and invincible, You are never born, You never die, Says Nanak, You are forever present in us. You Yourself are the source of instruction, You are its recipient, You are with everyone..." [15]. So let us explore what the attributes of a Sikh are from the Eternal perspective as AGGS relates them to us.

Why don't we begin from the beginning? *Jap* is as concise a description of the qualities of an Infinite Sikh as we will find. We come to find that such an individual is foremost cognizant of his unity with all. It is only from such a sense of acceptance that we can truly invest our relationships with the hallmark of *Ik Oankar*, which is Love. "The Divine One is the mighty support of the devotees. They recognize no other besides the Light. Every thread of their being is drenched in love." [16]. What follows from this is *Sat Naam* (*Naam* being the manifestation of *Akal Purakh* within our physical reality. In other words, *Naam* is the *sirgun* dimension of *Akal Purakh*, just as *Ik Oankar* is the *nirgun* dimension of the same Being). The Truth is the hallmark or the signpost that marks the way to *Naam* within the perspective that has been developed above. The Infinite Sikh is at once truthful and recognizes truth as the tool by which the *Hukm* of *Akal Purakh* (the inter-relational manifestation of *Naam* in our world) may be discovered and incorporated in oneself as we discussed at the beginning of this inquiry. This Truth is of a timeless nature. "True before time, True throughout time, True here and now, Says Nanak, Truth is evermore." [17]). Furthermore the Infinite Sikh is without fear. S/he (the infinite Sikh) is without enmity. S/he (the infinite Sikh) is without attachment to her/his form and recognizes her/his essential nature to be timeless, unborn (and so undying) and self-existent [2]. Moving beyond the opening passage we find that other qualities include contentment and knowledge. "Hearing leads us to truth, contentment and knowledge." [18]. Also on the same page we find, "Says Nanak, the devout enjoy eternal bliss (joy)" [19]. Later we find, "Wear contentment as your earrings, let honest actions be your pouch and begging bowl, make inner contemplation your penitential ashes. Death shall be the cloak you wear, pure living your yogic discipline and faith the staff you lean upon. Accept all humans as your equals, and let them be your only sect. Conquering ourselves, we conquer the world...With knowledge as the banquet, compassion as the hostess, let the sacred music (*Anahad Shabad*) resonate in every heart. The

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One is supreme, the whole cosmos under Its sway, why revere feats and miracles which lead you astray?" [20, 21]. From this passage we are reminded that an Infinite Sikh cares nothing for miracles or miracle stories because everything is part of the miraculous creation if we can but have eyes to see it. The infinite Sikh does not draw distinctions between those who are of his/her sect (religion) and those who are not. For such an individual all are equal and he regards all in that light as his brothers and sisters. We are commended to obtain knowledge. For what other purpose is truth, than to allow us to examine our transient world for the infinite Reality of the *Hukm* of *Akal Purakh*? Elsewhere we are reminded that the Infinite Sikh is patient and seeks moderation and wisdom [22]. What a clear picture our Gurus have painted for us in their own definition of a Sikh! The question remains, however, what is our definition?

CONCLUSION

It is clear from the writing of the Gurus that no particular religion held any higher value to them than another. Rather they sought to redefine the essential elements of spiritual inquiry and spiritual focus. To them all were equal before *Akal Purakh* and the *Hukm* and *Naam* with which the Almighty invests the whole of creation. *"Of all faiths, the best faith is to contemplate Naam and to live purely"* [23]. The Gurus made their choice. It remains for us to make our own choice, both as individuals and as a community. The question of importance is not really how they chose to define *Sikhi* (Sikhism) in their time but how we choose to define Sikhism in our own time. The choice is clear. We may choose exclusion or we may choose inclusion. We may choose to focus upon the temporal and the disunitive nature of our apparent selves or we may choose to live in the eternal and unifying essence of the spiritual beings we truly are. It is we who choose to define Sikhism as a religion and then waste our valuable lives in bickering over meaningless minutiae, afraid to address the real issues of the very real pain and suffering of our brothers and sisters. As long we believe in Sikhism as a religion, we will continue to decline into a parochial spiral of the worship of a partial recollection of our past. As soon as we open our eyes to the truth of the Transcendent Nature of the Reality of *Akal Purakh*, we become active in our world. The Universality of the message of the Gurus cries out to be released from the narrow perspective within which we have shackled it. We need only define ourselves as universal and infinite and that is what we will be. We need only be alive in the present and the Word will live in us and through us. We need only become firm in *Sat* as individuals and we can transform our fractured *Sangat* (congregation) into the

Satsangat (congregation based upon a focus on Undivided Truth) that it was originally intended to be. We have too long distracted ourselves with trivial debate while forsaking the real decision that we daily fail to make from that broadest of perspectives.

Regardless of the decision we make, the world is perfect in all moments. It is forever a perfect reflection of the choices we have made and currently make. The *Hukm* is made manifest at all times regardless of our choices and is indifferent to the choices we make. It is simply the summation of the rules of the game and it will broach no cheating. The Guru is sent to us as an example of how we might live in harmony and congruence with the *Hukm* and has made it clear that the path of disunity, pride, exclusion and religious separation is the incongruent choice. To accept all as ourselves and to understand that Sikhism is a belief system that rises above all religious distinction is to realize and experience the height of being and bliss which is ever offered to us by *Satguru*. We need only accept that which is freely offered. *"Bartering away pride, we must purchase our self, and weigh the Name in the scales of our heart."* [24]. The cost may seem great to us but it is in truth the best deal ever offered. It is the giving of nothing for the gift of all. It comes down to choice and definition. Do we choose growth or do we choose the false comfort of familiar stagnation. How we define our Sikhism in our age will be our answer to that question. I will conclude, then, by leaving the question unanswered, just I had come to it. In truth it is not my answer alone that matters, it is ours. So tell me, how do you define Sikhism?

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23. AGGS, M 5, P 266: ਸਰਬ ਧਰਮ ਮਹਿ ਸਰੋਸਟ ਧਰਮ ॥ ਹਰਿ ਕੇ ਨਾਮੁ ਜਪਿ ਨਿਰਮਲ ਕਰਮੁ ॥
24. AGGS, M 5, P 283: ਤਜਿ ਅਭਿਮਾਨੁ ਲੋਹੁ ਮਨ ਮੋਲਿ ॥ ਰਾਮ ਨਾਮੁ ਹਿਰਦੇ ਮਹਿ ਭੋਲਿ ॥