

# SIKHISM: WHEREIN LIES THE UNIQUENESS?

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## ABSTRACT

*For a long time now Sikhs, like others, have made claims that Sikhism is a unique religion, or that it is a universal faith. What exactly do they mean by this? If it is truly unique then why has the faith failed to find a following amongst non-Punjabis in any significant numbers? This short paper will attempt to clarify what exactly may have been meant by that claim, and to "prove" that our failure to propagate the faith has, to a very large extent, been the result of our failure to exploit the uniqueness of Nanakian Philosophy as contained in the Aad Guru Granth Sahib.*

## INTRODUCTION

**B**efore embarking on a discussion of the lofty claim implied by the title of the Mini-symposium "Uniqueness in Sikhism", it is necessary to define some key words.

'Religion' is difficult to define, since it means different things to different people, both academics and lay persons; but very broadly '*Religion is any specific system of belief about deity, often involving rituals, a code of ethics, a philosophy of life, and a worldview.*' [4] The term 'faith' is frequently used to mean religion and is used interchangeably with 'religion' by most; therefore it is not out of place to define the word. **Faith** is defined as '*belief in the traditional doctrines of a religion... firm belief in something for which there is no proof*' [3] and in this context faith does mean religion [3].

However, the key word that requires definition is 'unique'. In our context it means '*...being without a like or equal*' [3]; something that is '*...distinctively characteristic*' [3]. It has to be kept in mind that it is possible for an idea or ideology to be unique without necessarily being any good. This surely is not the uniqueness that the title implies, and therefore, the uniqueness, if any, must be good or at the very least neutral when compared to other faiths.

With these word definitions, and caveats, in place, it may now be possible to re-state the proposition as follows: that Sikhism is a religion with distinctive characteristics, that there is no other religion like it and that it has no equal. However, the last portion of the re-stated proposition, 'that it has no equal', is likely to be perceived as presumptuous, if not out rightly arrogant, and therefore, not likely to sit well with non-Sikhs. A more toned-down proposition would be: "In key areas, Sikhism is so distinctively different from other religions in its approach to God, Deities and Humanity, that it can

justifiably lay claim to uniqueness without making claims of being **the only** answer." And that is what the proponents of the proposition have set out to discuss, under the concise heading "Uniqueness in Sikhism". The uniqueness in Sikhism has to be explored keeping the non-Sikh in mind, because from the viewpoint of a Sikh it **is** unique (in the best sense of the word) and nothing more need be discussed. What then is the purpose of the discussion? It must surely be aimed at the non-Sikh who, having been shown this uniqueness would, hopefully, develop an interest in studying the faith and eventually embracing it.

## A Sikh

At this point it is pertinent to look at how a non-Sikh identifies or recognizes a Sikh (based on his external form since in most cases that is the only view of the faith he may have. Even here the recognition will be limited to the male Sikh, recognizable by the turban and the beard, which are prominent features of the Khalsa. Whether only the Khalsa is the true representative of a Sikh, or whether there are other categories that are, or should be, recognized as Sikhs, is not relevant to this debate, and the issue will, therefore, not be dwelled upon any further. This distinctive, external form of a Sikh, which allows a (male) Sikh to "stand out" in a crowd, has been on display for a long time. It does not seem to have engendered much interest in the faith by sufficient numbers of non-Sikhs to be considered important in relation to enticing students, and eventually converts, to the faith.

In Malaysia if the question "Who are Sikhs?" is put to any ordinary non-Sikh, by and large you will get the following answer: "They are those guys with the turban and beard." The slightly better informed will add: "The founder of Sikhism is Guru Nanak". Presumably the situation will not differ much more elsewhere outside India. Whilst the external appearance of the Khalsa Sikh is truly unique, this cannot be the uniqueness intended by the title.

## SOURCE OF UNIQUENESS

Clearly the uniqueness of Sikhism must lie in its Holy Scripture, the Aad Guru Granth Sahib (AGGS) [1]. This is the repository of the entire Sikh religious philosophy and contains the writings of several Sikh Gurus, and others. The AGGS was compiled and signed by Guru Arjan (the Fifth Guru) and given a preeminent place in Sikh corporate life. This original, authenticated copy, the *Kartarpuri Bir*, is extant. Thereafter other copies were made. To this Guru Gobind Singh added the writings of the Guru Tegh Bahadur. Before his demise Guru Gobind Singh declared that after him the line of human Gurus would end, and the AGGS (the Sabd) would be the final and eternal Guru of the Sikhs. In this sense the Scripture itself is unique, having been compiled by a preceptor of the faith and declared a Guru by its last human preceptor. However, even this is not the uniqueness that needs discussion or declaring. It is the uniqueness of the philosophy that is being alluded to in this discussion.

The “elevation” of the Scripture to the status of “Guru”, as clearly seen from the form of address: “Guru Granth Sahib” has, unfortunately led to the Volume (physically) being worshipped almost as an idol. [5] That, however, was never the intent of the Gurus, including Guru Gobind Singh. “Sikhism accepts *Sabd* as Guru.” [6] This was always the intent of the Gurus, from the very beginning (Guru Nanak). It is the *sabd* (word or philosophy in the AGGS) that is the Guru. The line of argument for this assertion, together with the historical “progression” from “Sabd Guru to Granth Guru” has been lucidly tackled by Chahal in his book of the same title. [2] It is this *Sabd* as incorporated in the AGGS that is unique; it is the message conveyed by this Sabd that

needs elucidating and needs to be understood. More than 400 years after the Installation of the Granth Sahib as Holy Scripture, and almost 300 years after it being declared the last Guru of the Sikhs (by Guru Gobind Singh) Sikhism remains the faith of a handful (in global terms). It is our failure to capitalize on the uniqueness of the philosophy of the *sabd* that has resulted in Sikhism not being more universally embraced. In this age and time it is the mind that has to be intellectually satisfied if any doctrine is to be accepted in substantial numbers. To achieve this we will have to overhaul our preaching methods, change our focus, and lean on our learned Sikh scholars to expound on the *sabd*. And acknowledging his limitations this writer leaves that to those more qualified.

## REFERENCES

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