

# SIKHS AND IDOL WORSHIP

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## ABSTRACT

*Do Sikhs believe in idol worship? Are Sikhs idol worshippers? Ask any Sikh and the answer to each question will usually be an unequivocal 'NO'. Whilst Sikh philosophy does, in fact, back such an answer, the question remains whether current Sikh practices support these assertions. This essay is an attempt at ascertaining if practice matches theory.*

## INTRODUCTION

Polytheism and idol worship was the norm in the early years of mankind's spiritual quest and religious development, all the historical evidence so suggests. Over time monotheism began to establish its primacy, and the theology of such monotheistic faiths began to demand that this One God could not be represented in any form, and so it became fashionable to become iconoclasts. In these endeavors some faiths outdid others, and even took perverse pleasure in the condemnation and destruction of graven images.

Sikhism is a monotheistic faith and its theology does not allow idol worship for its adherents. But Sikhism has not ever been party to iconoclastic tendencies. What needs scrutiny is whether Sikhs themselves are idol worshippers; can their practices be interpreted as idol worship?

### Some Definitions

As a preliminary it is necessary to define some key words that may be employed in this article.

What is an **'idol'**, as meant in this context? It is defined as "*a representation or symbol of an object of worship*". [6]

**'Worship'** is "*reverence offered a divine being or supernatural power; also : an act of expressing such reverence*". [6]

**'Reverence'**: "*honor or respect felt or shown...; especially: profound adoring awe respect*". [6]

**'Venerate'**: 1: *to regard with reverential respect or with admiring deference* 2 : *to honor (as an icon or a relic) with a ritual act of devotion.*" [6]

Admittedly there are subtle differences in the meanings of these words but the dictionary [6] actually lists the

following as synonyms: revere, reverence, venerate, worship.

Using just these definitions it is possible to construct a definition of **'idol worship'** as '*a reverence offered to a representation or symbol of the object of worship*'. Put simply, idol worship means worshipping a symbol (or representation) of God, that is: it is the symbol or representation that is worshipped here and NOT God. In the strictest sense of this definition such a devotee, who worships even a symbolic representation of God, would be a true idol-worshipper. But is this what such worshippers intend? Is this what non-idol-worshippers think that idol-worshippers mean? Perhaps it is just the apparent or visible devotion shown to such idols, which gives this impression. What if the worshipper is clear in his mind that he is worshipping God even as he stands before or bows to the idol, whatever its purpose in the ritual: would that constitute idol-worship? If he KNOWS that he is using the image only to create some kind of focus, but that the ACTUAL prayer / petition is directed to that One, Formless God, does THAT constitute idolatry?

There is a clear, if subtle, difference between the two groups, and a closer scrutiny of the actual practices, and intents, of devotees is necessary if the two are to be set apart. This is a difference that some, the Catholic Church for example, keenly emphasize.

## DISCUSSION

Generally, anyone praying to, bowing to or prostrating before an idol carved in stone, or other such material, or before any article, whatever the material it is constituted

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**Editorial Note:** The educational article of Dr Sidhu has been supplemented with extra knowledge on the Idol Worship from the Aad Guru Granth Sahib by Prof Dr Devinder Singh Chahal and Dr Virinder Singh Grewal in next article: "*Idol Worship and Nanakian Philosophy?*"

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of or whatever the shape, would be called an idol-worshipper. Taken as such, this is a very broad definition and could well encompass as idol-worship, methods of worship and rituals, which ordinarily would not be so considered by the adherents of the several faiths.

### 1. The Abrahamic Faiths

The three Abrahamic faiths (Judeo-Christian-Islamic traditions), in keeping with all faiths claiming to be purely monotheistic, in particular, will be at the forefront of condemnation of idol-worship, and will vehemently refute any suggestion that there is even a modicum of such worship in the practice of their respective faiths. A closer examination of the practices, in each case, may give cause to doubt the confidence of such claims.

The Jews actually started off as polytheists but eventually moved on to become strict monotheists. In their former state idol-worship was natural but as a monotheistic faith their aversion to any form of idol worship reached an extreme, such that they even refused to permit Roman troops to enter their territory with flags, and even detected idols in the portraits of the Caesars stamped on coins. [14] What, then, is one to make of the devotion of Jews at the Wailing Wall?

Christianity would not ever admit to idolatry. Practices vary between the multitude denominations and sects, and noticeably between the two broad groupings of Catholics and Protestants. The Catholic Encyclopedia [2] states: “Idolatry etymologically denotes Divine worship given to an image, but its signification has been extended to all Divine worship given to anyone or anything but the true God... The specific note of idolatry is its direct opposition to the primary object of Divine worship; it bestows on a creature the reverence due to God alone... The creature is often represented by an image, an idol.”

Yet a look at so many of the liturgical practices, and other rituals, associated with the Catholic Church appear to strongly suggest some degree of idol-worship, something the Church is quick to deny, by emphasizing that ‘An essential difference exists between idolatry and the veneration of images practiced in the Catholic Church, viz., that while the idolater credits the image he reverences with Divinity or Divine powers, the Catholic knows “that in images there is no divinity or virtue...”’ [2]

This appears to give the impression that worship (which is due to the Divine) is different from veneration which may be given to images, but a closer look at the first part of the quote from the Catholic Encyclopedia shows that even “reverence (maybe) due to God”. What, says the Church, sets the Catholics apart from idol-worshipper is the fact ‘the Catholic knows “that in images there is no

divinity or virtue”.

Therefore, what really counts, in being considered an idol-worshipper or otherwise, is the intent or knowledge of the worshipper. To borrow a phrase from law, it’s the *mens rea* that makes the difference. The Catholic Church presumes that the Catholic knows the difference “between idolatry and the veneration of images” whilst all others, Hindus for example, do not. Ask the so-called idol-worshippers and the answer would well surprise the Church. Nevertheless, this brings us back to the question asked earlier: If a person KNOWS that he is using the image only to create some kind of focus and so knows that there is no divinity or virtue in it, and that the ACTUAL prayer / petition is directed to God alone, would THAT constitute idolatry? Not by Catholic standards.

Islam’s aversion to idols and idol-worship is second to none, and in its extreme it has manifested itself in the actions of its most ardent followers. The destruction of images from temples and other monuments in India’s Mogul history bears ample testimony to that. In recent times we have seen it in Afghanistan in the shameful destruction of the Bamiyan Buddha statues. Does the kissing of the black stone of the Ka’aba constitute idolatry or is it merely reverence *a la* Catholicism? When a Muslim prays does he have any image in mind: the Ka’aba perhaps? Does the mental image of the icon, that one has whilst praying, constitute an idol? There is much debate on the subject, but what is clear is that in some minds certain practices of Muslims, who by no means constitute one, monolithic group, constitute idol worship.

### 2. Hinduism

Without getting into a debate about what is Hinduism or the assertions that Hinduism defies definition, no examination of idol worship, in our context, can be complete without considering the Hindu mode of worship. Any talk of idol worship will bring to mind the myriad idols in the Hindu Temples. We are witnesses to the daily idol worship (as we see it) that takes place. Hindus, though considered polytheists by many, will actually tell you that they believe in one Supreme God and that the various ‘gods’ in their pantheon are merely manifestations of this one Supreme Being. Keeping this in mind it may be relevant to pose the question again: What if the worshipper is clear in his mind that he is worshipping the ‘one Supreme God’ even as he stands before or bows to the idol, whatever its purpose in the ritual: would that constitute idol-worship? Let us assume that this would still constitute idol worship; how is it any different from the ‘reverence’ shown to the AGGS or to icons by Catholics, for example, and the symbolism of the other monotheistic faiths? So if the monotheistic

believers are not idol worshippers neither are such Hindus.

If, on the other hand, this does **not** constitute idol worship, is it possible that most, if not all, Hindus are not idol worshippers? Admittedly, there must be some who actually do consider the idols as Gods and worship them. That this is not an idle assertion, no pun intended, this is what a leading Hindu has to say: “Idols are not the idle fancies of sculptors, but shining channels through which the heart of the devotee is attracted to and flows towards God. Though the image is worshipped, the devotee feels the presence of the Lord in it and pours out his devotion unto it. It is the appalling ignorance of the modern sensual man that clouds his vision and prevents him from seeing Divinity in lovely and enchanting idols of His form... The divinity of the all-pervading God is vibrant in every atom of creation. There is not a speck of space where He is not. Why do you then say that He is not in the idols?” [13]

It is one thing to see Divinity in the entire Creation, but quite another to see “Divinity in lovely and enchanting idols of His form” [see Footnote 3]. But the rest of Creation does not get the worship that the idol does. The semantics employed here is more about forcing an argument about an idea, than about presenting the idea as understood by ordinary individuals who are averse to idol worship.

Although Sri Swami Sivananda says “The idol is only a symbol of the Divine”, he also goes on to say that “For a devotee... He draws inspiration from the image. The image guides him. It talks to him. It assumes human form to help him in a variety of ways... Only the devotees understand these.” [13] Worship of images in this way will, to most people, constitute idol worship. The Hindu devotee clearly appears to worship the sculpted idols, and in the minds of many the distinction between the idol as a representation of God and in being God itself may well be blurred. But if such a devotee is pointedly asked, “Do you really think this stone idol is God?” the odds are the reply will be to the effect, “Of course not. This is merely a representation of God.” But ask if Hanuman or Ganesh is god and the answer will well be ‘yes’. So are Hindus idol worshippers? The answer would appear to be both ‘yes’ and ‘no’, depending on the mental make up of the devotee.

### 3. Sikh Perceptions

What do ordinary Sikhs, or the majority of them, mean by idol worship? A “survey” of sorts (Yahoo Groups ‘Sikh Diaspora’ under the headings ‘Precise Definitions’ and ‘Idol Worship’) of what idol-worship means showed that most educated Sikhs are quite clear in their minds that only the Creator is to be worshipped and worship of

any representation of the Creator would be idol-worship and hence against the faith. This is simple enough, but it does not answer specifically what each respondent to the “survey” considers as idol-worship.

Whilst no Sikh will ever admit to being an idol-worshipper, could some of the practices, whether or not in conformity with the Sikh Code of Conduct, the Sikh *Rehit Maryada* (SRM) [5], be considered as such or akin to idol worship? This is particularly relevant to the manner in which Sikhs treat their scripture, the Aad Guru Granth Sahib (AGGS) [1].

Dr Jaspal Singh alleges “...the Sikhs claim that they are against idol worshipping. Many of them think that to sculpt images of Sikh Gurus is blasphemous, though in their innocence they often worship the portraits of the Sikh Gurus...The problem with the Sikhs is that they do not know whether they are idol or portrait worshippers or not. The true believers of course are not idol worshippers though they can be portrait worshippers, also a form of idolatry.” [11] What Dr Jaspal Singh does not explain is how could true believers **not** be idol worshippers when they “can be portrait worshippers...” which he concedes is “...also a form of idolatry.”

In the “survey” mentioned above most Sikhs who responded (including Tejpal S Thind, Virinder S Grewal, Pritam Singh, Sukh Gill, Karamjit Singh, Jit Chandan, Jodh Singh) [10] were clear that Sikhs are not supposed to be idol worshippers but that Sikh practices generally amount to idol worship [10]

#### Practices Associated with the Handling of the AGGS

*Do Sikhs treat the AGGS as an idol?* If answered in the affirmative, then Sikhs are idol worshippers. It may be useful to look at some of the practices associated with the handling of the AGGS before an attempt is made to answer this.

According to the Sikh *Rehit Maryada* [5]:

- a. The *Adi Granth* [ see Footnote 4] (AGGS) should be opened each day...should not be left open at night...
- b. The *Adi Granth* should be placed in an elevated position on a form or stool (*manji*)...Small cushions should be used to support it and a *romalla* (square of cloth) used to cover it between readings whilst it is open. An awning (*chanini*) should be erected over the *Adi Granth* and a *chauri* should be available for waiving over the Book.
- c. A person who carries the *Adi Granth* should walk barefoot but shoes may be worn if circumstances make it desirable.
- d. Whenever another copy of the *Adi Granth* is brought into the Gurdwara everyone present should stand up as

- a mark of respect.
- e. If anyone walks around the *Adi Granth* or the Gurdwara it should be in a clockwise direction

Although not specifically stated in the Sikh *Rehit Maryada* it is customary to carry the *Adi Granth* on the head by the bearer moving the copy from one place to another.

Every night, at the close of the day, after the last prayer, the AGGS is 'put to bed'. A special place is generally prepared in every Gurdwara these days for this purpose, and named '*Sach Khand*'. Many have air-conditioned these special rooms, or at least put in a fan [7]. "Certain practices attached to the Guru Granth Sahib which do not seem consistent with the teaching of Sikhism have occasionally crept into Sikh devotionism. There is the practice of putting the scripture to bed, like a statue of Krishna or some other Hindu deity..." [4]

Many such practices would be suggestive of idol-worship, but to even so imply would be to invite the wrath of believers who 'merely hold the AGGS in reverence and do not worship it as an idol'. The very concept of the AGGS as the Sikhs' Eternal 'Living Guru' is so misinterpreted as to associate the word 'living' as one would in relation to a live organism. Indeed "...Sikhs continue to state that it is our "Living Guru" i.e. a being with human physiology, own brain and thought processes, no one can argue with them." [12] Further more they hold the view "...that important decisions can be made by the SGGGS (AGGS) independently of human intervention." [12] Even the wasted printing paper and material from the printing presses where the AGGS is printed and bound into books is treated with a "reverence" not afforded to human beings: "All waste paper from the print machines is to be covered in *Rumalas* and then cremated in crematorium at Govindwal Sahib. I have seen this crematorium, which is only for cremating old torn birs and now waste from this factory." [12]

Sukh Gill admits that we have been "...conditioned that GURU GRANTH is the everlasting LIVING GURU..." but is of the opinion that "...canonizing any man made scriptures tantamounts idol worship." [9] Even those who are capable of distinguishing between the message of the AGGS and the physical Book per se, what do they have in mind when they worship: an image of the Book? Hard though it is for most individuals to imagine worship without ANY image of any kind in the mind, the benefit of the doubt may be given to those who would make such claims.

### General Discussion

The monotheistic faiths clearly declare an avowed aversion to idol worship, their own practices notwithstanding. Perhaps a look at a couple of other issues at this juncture is in order.

Bearing in mind that this essay looks at idol worship from the monotheistic viewpoint the first questions may be asked: Why the certainty that there is only one God? Could there be multiple? After all the assertion, in each case, is only faith based. There is no proof, in the commonly understood sense of the word, one way or the other? This will engender a whole new debate and more questions, and must, for now, be left alone.

The next real question is, as asked by Jit Chandan: "Is idol worship bad or wrong?" He says "Not necessarily... Hindus... do not consider these idols as God but... manifestations of God." [3] In other words, what is wrong with idol worship, especially given that one knows that the sculpted idol per se is powerless but that it is just a representation of the Divine? It cannot be denied that most people need some kind of point-of-focus or mental image in order to pray. The Swami cannot be too far off the mark, if at all, when he says "A symbol is absolutely indispensable for fixing the mind. The mind wants a prop to lean upon. It cannot have a conception of the Absolute in the initial stages. Without the help of some external aid, in the initial stages, the mind cannot be centralized. In the beginning, concentration or meditation is not possible without a symbol." [13] Again this is not quite relevant to the intent of this paper which sets out to examine whether the professed anti-idol-worship stance is satisfied by the practices of Sikhs generally, and must therefore be left for another time.

Perhaps it is as Karamjit Singh says "Different religions have different idols to give personification to one god such as a visual presentation through (which) human beings can focus their minds." [8] The Sikhs may be no different.

### CONCLUSION

It is clear that Sikhism does not condone or accept idol worship. It is equally clear that many Sikh practices, whether or not sanctioned by the AGGS or the Sikh *Rehit Maryada* (SRM), actually conform to idol worship as perceived by most. This becomes near crystal-clear in relation to their treatment of the AGGS. In other words, though the faith is against idol worship its adherents are, in practice, idol worshippers. At best the defenses offered to this allegation will be overcome by defining idol worship differently, but they will not deter from the fact. That this conclusion is not entirely misplaced, if at all, is buttressed by the opinions of so many learned Sikhs as seen from their comments in discussions on the Sikh Diaspora Forum.

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Religious Responsibility for achieving ‘Peace in the World’ and maintaining it through love, compassion, oneness, tolerance, sacrifice, equality and dignity calls upon not only the religious leaders but social and political leaders as well. The Natural resources blessed upon the Earth are aplenty for survival and sustenance of every creature. The human blessed with faculties to search, create, and control progress can contribute to the oneness and equality of humanity. The Prophets of every religion gave humanity enough sermons to be applied in daily life and live happily. It is not impossible to achieve Peace in the World and live together enjoying nature, IF and THIS IS THE BIGGEST IF human ever learns to apply the TRUTHFUL principles of the Prophets.

**In conclusion**, I would like to say that I have written another article like many others reminding humanity about the needs for achieving and maintaining Peace in the World, BUT, will any body listen?  
**“NOT IN THE LIFE OF HUMANITY”**

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## Footnote

1. *This paper has looked at idol worship generally from the viewpoint of monotheists who insist that the Divine is One, Formless and does not incarnate. That does not necessarily mean that the view is correct or flawless. Christianity, for example, though claiming to be monotheistic has its Trinity and God did come to earth in human form.*
2. *SGGS (Sri Guru Granth Sahib) and Adi Granth are used synonymously with AGGS.*
3. *For Sikhs, Guru Nanak makes it clear that God is Nirankar, i.e. Formless.*
4. *In the versions printed by the SGPC it is Sri Guru Granth Sahib Ji in the Punjabi version and Guru Granth in English version but not Adi Granth, though Cole and Sambhi refer to it as such.*

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