

## **SIKHISM: Paths to Humanism**

### **A brief overview of the origins of Sikhism**

Sikhism, founded by Guru Nanak in the 16<sup>th</sup> century in the Punjab district of what is now India and Pakistan, is based on his teaching and those of the nine Gurus who followed him. The voice of Guru Nanak was a voice of compassion and a plea for peace and unity during a time of widespread communal hatred. Wherever he traveled, he spoke out against what appeared to him as empty or harmful religious rituals such as idol worship, the caste system, and the sacrifice of widows. His followers became known as the Guru's disciples or Sikhs.

Historians in Eastern religions generally believe that Sikhism is a syncretistic religion, originally related to the Bhakti movement in Hinduism and the Sufi branch of Islam, to which many independent beliefs and practices were added. Some Sikhs believe that their religion is a re-purification of Hinduism and view Sikhism as part of the Hindu religious tradition. Many Sikhs disagree and believe that their religion is a direct revelation, a religion that was not derived from either Hinduism or Islam.

Guru Nanak taught a strict monotheism along with the brotherhood of humanity. A succession of nine Gurus, regarded as reincarnations of Guru Nanak, led the religion during the period from Guru Nanak's death in 1539 until 1708. At that time, the functions of the Guru passed to the Panth and to the holy text, Guru Granth Sahib, considered the 11th Guru. Panth refers to the path to salvation obtained by using the Guru's advice or words. More recently it is used to describe the worldwide Sikh community.

Guru Granth Sahib is the central religious text of Sikhism and is considered by Sikhs to be the sovereign guru of the religion. It is an extensive text compiled and composed during the period of Sikh gurus from 1469 to 1708. The text remains the holy scripture of the Sikhs, regarded as the teachings of the Ten Gurus. It is, however, more than just a scripture since the Sikhs treat the Granth (holy book) as their living Guru. The text spans 1430 pages and contains the words spoken by the founders of the Sikh religion – the Ten Gurus of Sikhism – and the words of various figures from other religions including Hinduism and Islam.

Guru Nanak, who is often described as a humanist, taught a message of love. It has been said that he saw God in humanism and that, in a true sense, his religion was humanism. His view was of a universal God common to all humankind, not limited to any religion, nation, race, creed, color, or gender. The Institute of Sikh Studies has stated that “a Sikh is pious in his religiosity, active in social life, aware of justice, and is responsive to any injustice done to anyone. It is this supreme ideal, which the Sikh Gurus in all their humanist zeal have given to their Sikhs.”

Human rights and social justice form a cornerstone of Sikh belief, and Sikh history features many examples of Sikh Gurus and their followers making countless sacrifices for the cause of religious freedom and justice.

The Sikh religion today has a following of over 20 million people and is the world's 5th largest religion. It is estimated that there are approximately 500,000 Sikhs in the United States.

Sources:

-- Who are Sikhs? What is Sikhism? (<http://www.sikhnet.com/pages/who-are-sikhs-what-sikhism>)

-- Sikhism: Its origin, history, holy text, etc. (<http://www.religioustolerance.org/sikhism1.htm>)

-- Introduction to Sikhism (<http://www.sikhs.org/summary.htm>)

**The key principles of Sikhism**

There are numerous illustrations of the key principles of the Sikh religion. We have compiled the following list from a variety of sources and highlighted the key concepts in each of them.

Sikhism stresses service to others and views the primary task in life as helping the poor, needy, and oppressed. **Selfless service** is conceived as service to the entire human race irrespective of caste, color, creed, gender or country. Sikhs are encouraged to apply their manual labor or professional skills to assist those less fortunate to improve their health, well being, and education so that they can become more active members of their community. (In Sikhism, the word "seva" refers to selfless service for altruistic purposes on behalf of and for the betterment of others.)

Sikhism emphasizes a **moral and ethical life**. A Sikh should represent moral responsibility and righteousness. Human beings are encouraged to develop their moral character through generosity, humility and self-reliance.

Sikhism teaches **equality** of all people of different races, religions, or sex. Sikhism teaches the full equality of men and women. Women can participate in any religious function, perform any Sikh ceremony, or lead the congregation in prayer.

Sikhism teaches "honest earning of bread with dignity", earning one's livelihood through creative, productive and **honest labor**.

Sikhism teaches **religious freedom**. All people have the right to follow their own paths without condemnation or coercion from others.

Sikhism stands for **social justice**, human liberty, equality, freedom of conscience, ethical living, and gender equality. The Sikhs have a long heritage of speaking out against injustice, standing up for the defenseless, working for civil liberties against human oppression, and fighting for justice where it doesn't exist.

-- And this priceless statement by Guru Nanak:

"Before becoming a Muslim, a Hindu, a Sikh or a Christian, let's become a human first."

## Sources:

- Sikhism 101: Facts, History, Beliefs, Gurus, Traditions, And Signs Of The Faith ([http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2014/01/31/sikhism-101\\_n\\_4698378.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2014/01/31/sikhism-101_n_4698378.html))
- Introduction to Sikhism (<http://www.sikhs.org/summary.htm>)
- Seva - Selfless Service (<http://sikhism.about.com/od/glossary/g/Seva.htm>)
- Principles of Sikhism (<http://www.sikhmissionarysociety.org/sms/smssikhism/principles/>)

In addition to these primary sources, “Sikhism is Humanism!!” is an interactive discussion web site which includes, among many other items, these three “basic principles of the Sikh faith reworded in modern language. The Gurus preached these principles of religious tolerance and brotherhood of humanity five hundred years ago.”

(1) Breaking down barriers of prejudice and hostility between religious communities and institutions.

(2) Confronting the powers of the world with the teachings of our religions rather than conforming to them when they act contrary to the well-being of humanity.

(3) Building inter-religious understanding in our local communities particularly where prejudices run strong.

([http://asiapacificuniverse.com/asia\\_pacific/messages1/2171.html](http://asiapacificuniverse.com/asia_pacific/messages1/2171.html))

## **A Central Principle of Sikhism: Social Justice**

As noted above, social justice is a central principle of Sikhism. Few have stated this more clearly and more precisely than Professor Upkar Singh Pardesi of Birmingham, United Kingdom in his statement on “Social Justice from a Sikh Perspective.” Several of the key concepts are included here.

“One definition of Social Justice is the desire to create a fair and socially mobile society through wealth distribution, equality of opportunity for personal development and protection of human rights. If we accept this definition, then achieving social justice is the bedrock of the Sikh faith and teachings.

“The central message of the Sikh Holy Scriptures, Sri Guru Grant Sahib Ji is of humanism and universal brotherhood. It is a source of inspiration for those who seek social justice, the equality of all people, the empowerment of women and of the under privileged. It is for those reasons that the text has remained alive as a guide to all those who value these fundamental principles of humanism and human integrity....

“A deeper interpretation of the four core tenets of the Sikh Dharam : kirat kamai (earning an honest living); wand (sharing); nishkam sewa (selfless service) and simran (prayer and contemplation) reveal how the practice of these principles contribute to the achievement of social justice.”

Professor Pardesi concluded that social justice is the one of the foundation stones of the Sikh faith and also that the principle of Sarbat Da Bhalla “embraces social justice and is a powerful

and relevant goal for all humans to pursue in the beginning of the third millennium.”

(Note. The term Sarbat Da Bhalla “encourages and compels Sikhs to ask for the ‘well being of everyone in the world.’”)

To read the entire document, see:

<https://www.linkedin.com/today/post/article/20140716213508-31210902-social-justice-from-a-sikh-perspective>

In addition to Professor Pardesi’s statement on social justice, Arvinder Singh has written a brief statement on “Humanistic Concerns of Sikhism.” In part, this is what he wrote:

“Prior to the emergence of Sikhism, in Medieval Indian society religious traditions did not take much care of humanistic concerns. The religions were confined to mere performance of empty rituals and outward religiosity. Under the tyrannical foreign rule, there was no scope for modern notion of liberty, equality and justice. Sikhism in 15th century had emerged as the youngest liberal and humanistic religion to protect the human dignity, individual freedom and human rights of masses. Sikh history have ample proofs which clearly show that how the Sikh Gurus raised strong voice against socioeconomic and political exploitation, transgression of human rights, infringement of individual liberties and disregard for human dignity. The institution of the Khalsa was created as vanguard and supporter of humanistic concerns of an individual. Sikh Gurus call for free, fair, equitable and democratic socio-political order which ensure the social equality, individual liberty and self-esteem of an individual.” (Note: The Khalsa is considered to be the brotherhood of the pure and is an order of loyal Sikhs bound by common identity and discipline.) For the entire article, see: <http://isrj.org/ArchiveArticle.aspx?ArticleID=1859>

### **The key principles of humanism**

Numerous statements by both individuals and organizations express the principles of humanism and describes humanism’s shared worldview with Sikhism.

“Humanism is the light of my life and the fire in my soul. It is the deep felt conviction, in every fiber of my being that human love is a power far transcending the relentless, onward rush of our largely deterministic cosmos. All human life must seek a reason for existence within the bounds of an uncaring physical world, and it is love coupled with empathy, democracy, and a commitment to **selfless service** which undergirds the faith of a humanist.” – Bette Chambers, former president of the American Humanist Association

“We define ourselves as humanists because our **moral and ethical frameworks** come from thinking things through, rather than any religious belief. We at Humanist Aid are committed to trying to live a good life, where we treat other people well and make a positive impact with our lives.” – Humanist Aid is a group of humanists in Sydney, Australia whose goal is to “make a positive difference to the lives of others.”

“... all people should view and treat each other as equals, and that everyone is entitled to human dignity. At the most fundamental level, **the principle of equality** is the basis of

individual freedom, self-determination and individual responsibility.” – The University of Humanistic Studies. The university, the youngest university in the Netherlands, is the only university in that country offering a degree program in humanistics.

“**Honest labor** bears a lovely face. Work if done honestly and in kind and honorably performed is beautiful satisfying and pleasurable ....Labor is indeed the life of humanity....” – Thomas Dekker was an English Elizabethan dramatist and pamphleteer.

“The basic idea of **freedom of religion** is that no one, especially the government, is allowed to force religion on anyone else or prohibit anyone from practicing a religion. To force others to support a church or profess belief in a church's tenets is as much a violation of their civil rights as is preventing them from practicing their religion. One component of freedom of religion is freedom of conscience. This is the freedom to hold and express our ideas sincerely. It s our civil right to accept or reject any religion or religious idea, and to do so openly and honestly without fear or coercion.” – Humanists of Utah, a chapter of the American Humanist Association

“Humanism is a rational philosophy informed by science, inspired by art, and motivated by compassion. Affirming the dignity of each human being, it supports the maximization of individual liberty and opportunity consonant with social and planetary responsibility. It advocates the extension of participatory democracy and the expansion of the open society, standing for human rights and **social justice**.” – The American Humanist Association

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We also suggest that you go to the sources noted below for a more complete presentation of the key principles of humanism. The principles cover a wide array of humanist concerns. We have drawn from several statements.

#### From Humanist Manifesto I (1933)

-- In place of the old attitudes involved in worship and prayer, the humanist finds his religious emotions expressed in a heightened sense of personal life and in a cooperative effort to promote social well-being.

--The goal of humanism is a free and universal society in which people voluntarily and intelligently cooperate for the common good.

([http://americanhumanist.org/Humanism/Humanist\\_Manifesto\\_I](http://americanhumanist.org/Humanism/Humanist_Manifesto_I))

#### From Humanist Manifesto II (1973)

-- From the Preface: “Humanism is an ethical process through which we all can move, above and beyond the divisive particulars, heroic personalities, dogmatic creeds, and ritual customs of past religions or their mere negation.”

-- From the Closing: “We will survive and prosper only in a world of shared humane values.... At the present juncture of history, commitment to all humankind is the highest commitment of which we are capable.” ([http://americanhumanist.org/Humanism/Humanist\\_Manifesto\\_II](http://americanhumanist.org/Humanism/Humanist_Manifesto_II))

From Humanist Manifesto III: Humanism and Its Aspirations (2003)

“...Thus engaged in the flow of life, we aspire to this vision with the informed conviction that humanity has the ability to progress toward its highest ideals. The responsibility for our lives and the kind of world in which we live is ours and ours alone.”

([http://americanhumanist.org/Humanism/Humanist\\_Manifesto\\_III](http://americanhumanist.org/Humanism/Humanist_Manifesto_III))

From the Amsterdam Declaration 2002 (International Humanist and Ethical Union)

Humanism is a lifestance aiming at the maximum possible fulfillment through the cultivation of ethical and creative living and offers an ethical and rational means of addressing the challenges of our times. Humanism can be a way of life for everyone everywhere.

(<http://iheu.org/humanism/the-amsterdam-declaration/>)

From “What Is Humanism?” by Fred Edwords

Former AHA Executive Director and currently the director of planned giving, Fred Edwords has written prolifically about the principles of humanism. In an essay on *What Is Humanism?* he concludes with a keen observation: “So, with modern humanism one finds a lifestance or worldview that is in tune with modern knowledge; is inspiring, socially conscious, and personally meaningful. It is not only the thinking person's outlook but that of the feeling person as well, for it has inspired the arts as much as it has the sciences; philanthropy as much as critique. And even in critique it is tolerant, defending the rights of all people to choose other ways, to speak and to write freely, to live their lives according to their own lights. So the choice is yours. Are you a humanist? You needn't answer ‘yes’ or ‘no.’ For it isn't an either-or proposition. Humanism is yours -- to adopt or to simply draw from. You may take a little or a lot, sip from the cup or drink it to the dregs. It's up to you.”

([http://americanhumanist.org/humanism/What\\_is\\_Humanism](http://americanhumanist.org/humanism/What_is_Humanism))

Helen Bennett provides her personal perspective in her poem “What Humanism Means to Me” in her book, *Humanism, What's That? A Book for Curious Kids* (Prometheus Books, Amherst, NY, 2005).

Humanism means to me  
I've got the opportunity  
To realize that I am free  
To take responsibility.

To me, it doesn't seem so odd  
That many people pray to God  
Whenever they are feeling low --  
It's just the way they have to go.

But when I do not know the way  
I do not feel the need to pray.  
I use my brain to figure out  
What the problem's all about.

I'm grateful that I have my eyes  
To see the beauty of the skies,  
I'm glad I have my ears to hear  
The voices of my friends so dear.

But best of all, my brains the one  
That figures out what must be done  
To help me run a better race,  
To make the world a better place.

For additional essays on Living the Humanist Life, Humanism and Traditional Religion and related issues, see: [http://americanhumanist.org/Who\\_We\\_Are/About\\_Humanism](http://americanhumanist.org/Who_We_Are/About_Humanism)

### **Sikhism and humanism: On Common Ground**

As we have indicated, the key principles of Sikhism and humanism are very comparable: selfless service, moral and ethical frameworks, equality, honest labor, religious freedom and, of course, social justice.

Humanists strive to embrace the moral principle in the Golden Rule, the ethic of reciprocity, and treat each other as one would like to be treated themselves -- with tolerance, consideration and compassion. The Golden Rule, a unifying humanistic principle, cannot be claimed for any one philosophy or religion. Throughout the ages, many traditions have promoted one or other versions of it. In Sikhism, the Golden Rule is "I am a stranger to no one; and no one is a stranger to me. Indeed, I am a friend to all." (Guru Granth Sahib, p.1299)

"Sikhism is based on humanistic and universal values of the purest form. Human freedom and dignity, self realization and self confidence, service and sacrifice have been the essential elements of its ethos. Humanism .... recognizes the entire humanity as one single race, free from racial barrier, free from caste and gender bias. Humanistic vision of the future presents the picture of a multi-faith society blessed with fraternal feelings and harmonious relations. Religious communities will remain, but communalism will vanish."

Source: Guru Nanak's Ecumenical Religion (Sikhism)– The Savior of Mankind –Prof Arvinder Singh ([http://sikhinstitute.org/july\\_2012/3-arvinder.htm](http://sikhinstitute.org/july_2012/3-arvinder.htm))

With regard to humanistic and universal values, Steve Ahlquist, an AHA activist from Rhode Island, recently wrote in a short essay *Humanism is Social Justice* that "Social justice is the view that everyone deserves equal economic, political and social rights and opportunities."

He further wrote: "Many, many non-humanists get to the same page as humanists when it comes to social justice. They have a faith rooted in Jesus or Muhammad or some ancient book or belief that brings them ultimately to the same convictions as humanists. Humanists may be tempted to say that these people took the long way to get to the same place, but in truth we are all at this moment in time in exactly the same world and at the same time. There are no winners or losers in the game of getting our philosophies right. What matters is that we have allies with

whom to pursue our goals of social justice....The power of humanism is that we put persons first, and since it has been shown time and again that people flourish in a world of equality and opportunity, there can be no humanism without a commitment to **social justice.**”

Richard A. Cohen, in an “Introduction: Humanism and Anti-humanism – Levinas, Cassirer, and Heidegger”, also wrote “Humanism, after all, is not merely the affirmation of the dignity of one person, of each individual alone; it is also the affirmation of the dignity of all humanity, the affirmation of an interhuman morality, community and **social justice.**”

In many ways, we are on “the same page” as you will see in the following statements which describe the lifestance of Sikhism and humanism. We both:

- Promote a life of peace, equality and positive actions.
- Reject discrimination of all kinds.
- Live according to individual and communal ethical commitments.
- Strive for liberty, justice, tolerance and non-violence.
- Treat all races and classes equally.
- Stress the full equality of men and women.
- Render service to humanity and love toward all.

### **What is the Next Step?**

What do we suggest as a next step? We recommend the book *Humanism As the Next Step* by Lloyd and Mary Morain (the Humanist Press, Washington, DC, new revised edition 2008) as your next reading since it presents a concise overview of the history and principles of modern humanism. We also suggest that you begin to dialogue with humanists in your community on the core humanist principles discussed above and look for additional commonalities which you are certain to find.

Also, if you harbor any doubts about the concept of a divinity (which many people of all religious traditions do according to the 2008 Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life) the next step would be to explore the American Humanist Association’s website ([americanhumanist.org/](http://americanhumanist.org/)) where you will find a wealth of information about humanism, our local groups, programs, publications and resources of all types for people of all ages. You can, of course, follow the American Humanist Association on Facebook and Twitter and become a member of the AHA. Perhaps you may wish to identify yourself as both a humanist and a Sikh. You surely would not be the first to do so. Many Sikhs realize that they have a home in humanism. We welcome you!

For additional information and for answers to any questions you might have about the humanist worldview and lifestance, please contact us at: [aha@americanhumanist.org](mailto:aha@americanhumanist.org)

### **A final word**

As we have indicated throughout this paper, Sikhs focuses on selfless service, a moral and ethical life, equality, honest labor, religious freedom and, of course, social justice – all of which

resonate closely with humanism. We stand on common ground. Let us begin to walk together on common ground. Let these principles and practices be the meeting place of the Sikh and the humanist lifestance.

Post script: Although these three books have been published a number of years ago, copies are available at a number of sources noted on the Internet. They also may be available at university or public libraries

*True Humanism of Guru Nanak* by Trilochan Singh; Publisher -- Gurdwara Parbandhak Committee, Delhi, 1968.

*The Great Humanist Guru Nanak* by Jogendra Singh and Daljeet Singh; Publisher – Languages Department, Punjab. 1970.

*Humanism of Guru Nanak : a philosophic inquiry* by Wazir Singh; Publisher – Ess Ess Publications, Delhi, 1977