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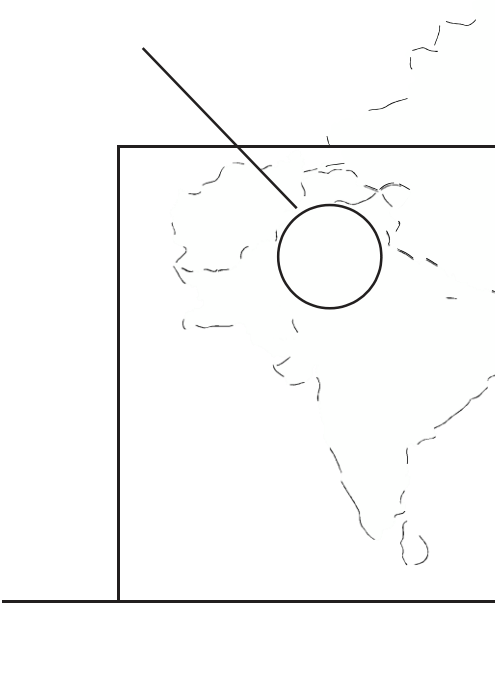
**SIKHISM**

By Harry Jivenmukta

## INTRODUCTION AND HISTORY

The Sikh religion started in the **Panjab**, (often spelled Punjab). Panjab means five rivers and refers to land in north western India. Up until 1947, before the country of Pakistan was created, the Panjab was a larger region. Today, some of the original Panjab is in Pakistan.

The area in North West India where Sikhism originated.



The founder of the Sikh religion, **Guru Nanak**, lived in the Panjab in the 15th and early 16th century. At the time of Nanak, northern India was controlled by the **Moghuls** who were Muslims. There was a constant battle of religious ideas between the indigenous **Hindus**, and the Muslim invaders who wanted to convert everyone to Islam.

In this context Nanak wanted to develop a new belief which would be neither Islam nor Hinduism. Some of the Sikh beliefs reflect this attempt to rationalise both religions. For instance, the Hindus believe in many Gods whilst Muslims believe in only one God. Nanak said;

**There is only one God  
but he takes many forms.**

In all there were **Ten Gurus** who led the Sikhs until the last one **Guru Gobind** died in 1708 and left as the truth the holy book called the **Guru Granth Sahib** which he instructed his followers to believe in to the exception of all else.

## QUESTIONS

Find out about the Moghuls' rule of northern India at the time of the birth of Sikhism.

Why was there great conflict between Hindus and Muslims?

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## THE TEN GURUS

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**Guru Nanak** was born near Lahore, (now in Pakistan), and was from a high caste family. At the time of Nanak most people were Hindus with some converting to Islam in response to the threat of the Moghul invaders. Nanak was not happy with life in business or agriculture and when he was about 30 years old he became a teacher, (Guru means teacher).

One of his most important writings was the **Japji** which is a prayer which Sikhs today read every day and talks about the nature of God. Nanak's writings were quite gentle and talked of a religion which did not require the strict or solitary lives in which many Hindus of the time believed.

Nanak settled in **Kartarpur** where he formed a group of followers called **Sikhs**, (ones who learn). He also established a free communal kitchen where anyone regardless of creed, caste, or religion could come and eat and share the goodwill of Nanak and his followers. This was a radical move because in India at that time it was not allowed for people of different castes to mix together in this way.

Nanak appointed Lehna as successor and he became known as **Guru Angad**.

**Guru Angad's** main achievements were to start to put together the religious writings of the Sikhs. Angad introduced a religious version of the Panjabi language which was called **Gurmukhi**. He also started writing the holy book, the **Guru Granth Sahib**, and started the building of **Gurdwaras**, (Sikh Temples).

The third Guru was **Amar Das** who was instrumental in dismantling the Hindu caste system in the Sikh communities. He believed that all humans are equal and that they should all be able to sit together and live together. He formalised the **Langar** which was communal eating at the Gurdwara. This still goes on today and Langar is served at all Gurdwaras every Sunday which is the main day for prayer in the Sikh community.

**Ram Das**, the fourth Guru, established **Amritsar** as the centre of Sikhism. He ordered the building of the **Golden Temple** at Amritsar.

**Arjun Dev**, the fifth Guru, saw the completion of the Golden Temple and also completed the Guru Granth Sahib. He was imprisoned by the Moghul Emperor, **Jahangir**, who had become concerned at the spread of Sikhism. Before he was tortured to death Arjun Dev appointed his son **Har Gobind** as his successor and told him to arm the Sikhs and fight for the rights of Sikhs to believe.

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### THE TEN GURUS

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The sixth Guru was **Har Gobind**. He organised the Sikhs into an army and ordered that Sikhs should fight to defend the faith, but should not be aggressors themselves. In 1627 war broke out between the Sikhs and the Moghul army and the Sikhs fled into the foothills of the Himalayas. They fought a guerrilla war and were very successful at times.

The seventh Guru, the grandson of Har Gobind was **Har Rai**. He wanted to make peace with the Moghuls and wanted nothing to do with wars and politics. He was a more spiritual person.

The eighth Guru was **Har Krishen** who did not live long. He died of smallpox. Before he died he said that the ninth Guru was to be found in Bahala. That Guru was to be Guru **Teg Bahadur**.

**Teg Bahadur** travelled around the Panjab trying to rally the Sikhs who were being increasingly persecuted. Often there were mass killings of Sikhs and bounty hunters would be paid by the number of Sikh heads they produced. Teg Bahadur himself was arrested and after refusing to become a Muslim he was tortured and killed by the Moghuls.

Teg Bahadur's son became the tenth Guru. **Guru Gobind Singh** was responsible for making Sikhism a very distinct religion from all others. He formed the **Khalsa** which means brotherhood. He baptised five people and then said that all Sikhs should be baptised to identify them as belonging to a separate religion. Henceforth it would require five Sikhs to baptise any new Sikh. These are known as the **Panch Piaras**, the beloved five.

Gobind ordered that all male Sikhs have **Singh**, (lion), as their surname, and all female Sikhs **Kaur**, (princess). This indicated equality and a refutation of the caste system. They adopted the **Five K's** to identify them apart from other people and swore to fight to protect the innocent and if need be give their life. The Sikhs fought hard against the Moghuls and after many battles the Moghuls decided to leave the Sikhs alone. There followed a period of peace for this new religion.

Gobind declared that there would not be any more human Gurus but that the **Guru Granth Sahib** would be the holy book which all Sikhs should follow and it would guide them in their lives.

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### QUESTIONS

Which of the Gurus played the biggest role in establishing Sikhism?

Choose two of the Gurus and write a more detailed biography of their lives.

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### THE SIKH TEMPLE

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Sikhs worship at a **Gurdwara**. This is popularly known by many people as a **Sikh Temple**. Gurdwaras can be any shape or size and can be quite elaborate or fairly plain. The important factor is that it should be a place where Sikhs can pray and share their beliefs. Most towns in Britain have a Gurdwara and some towns with a larger Sikh population may have several. All Gurdwaras have a tall flagpole outside with the Sikh flag flying to identify the place to others. The written symbol of the Sikhs is **Ik Onkar** which means **God is One**.

Inside, there will be a room, usually quite large where Sikhs pray. The main feature of this room is the front, where the **Granth**, (holy book), is kept. The Granth is placed on the **Takht**. This is a raised area rather like a throne with a pillar at each corner holding up a decorated 'canopy'. The Granth is kept covered with a silk cloth, **Palki**, when not in use.

There is room all around the Takht for people to pass around and at the front there is room for people to prostrate themselves before the Granth. People may leave money for the upkeep of the Gurdwara or foodstuffs for the Sangat to eat at Langar. At one side of the Takht there is a raised platform where people play music to the hymns and scriptures. These people who interpret the scriptures in music are called **Ragis**.

Everyone sits on the floor before the Granth and so there is usually a carpet on the floor sometimes covered with sheets to keep it clean. Everyone sits on the floor because it shows that all are equal before God and no-one is superior.

After the service people can eat Langar if they wish. There will be a place where the **Sangat**, (congregation), can sit to eat **Langar** together. There is usually a kitchen area adjoining this for the preparation of food. This is a practice started by the Gurus which intends to show equality and rejects the caste system where only certain people could sit together.

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### QUESTIONS

Why is it important that everyone be seen as being equal before God?

What is Langar? Why is it an important part of the Sikh religion?

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## BELIEFS

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Sikhs believe that there is one God. They believe that God is supreme and the creator of all things; because of this all men are brothers and all women are sisters. They believe that animals are lesser beings and that it is permissible for humans to manipulate them for work or food. Many baptised Sikhs are vegetarian but this is not a requirement of the faith.

Nanak taught that the world is not necessarily as it seems to people and that sometimes people see a false representation of the world and events around them. By meditating on God and the truth a people may find peace in their life.

Sikhism is very similar to Buddhism and Hinduism in some respects and there is a belief in **Karma**. Karma is the belief that all that a person does in life is kept as a record. If a person commits great evil then that person will be re-born as a lower creature, and if a person has done good he or she will be re-born as a better person. But only the person who commits no evil can break the cycle of re-birth and free their spirit. Individuals have the choice of either wasting the opportunity and being re-born lower down the animal scale next time, or by belief and meditation free the spirit from this seemingly eternal birth and re-birth and reach **Nirvana**, (or God).

Nirvana for Sikhs means something different than it does for Buddhists. Sikhs believe a more traditional idea of the soul joining with God, rather like Hindus believe. It must be remembered that Sikhism grew in an age when Hinduism, Islam and Buddhism were strong and necessarily borrowed some ideas and influences from these religions.

Unlike Hindus, Sikhs believe in the equality of all humans and do not recognise the caste system. In the Sikh religion men and women are also equal and either sex can be baptised in similar ceremonies. There are records of women leading Sikh armies into war against the Moghuls.

Sikhs are encouraged to work hard and help those less fortunate. Life is considered to be a gift from God and should not be abused by drugs or alcohol. Smoking tobacco is also banned. As with all religions there are some who live according to all the rules and others who try their best but may not be able to keep to them all.

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## QUESTIONS

How similar are the beliefs in Sikhism to Hinduism and Buddhism?

What is Karma and how does it affect the way we should live our lives?

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### BAPTISM AND DUTIES

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Only Sikhs who are baptised have to wear the 5 Ks, ( these are explained on page 7). There is a ceremony of baptism which Sikhs go through. This is voluntary and many Sikhs especially in the West find it difficult to lead a true life according to the rules laid down by the religion and do not, therefore, get baptised. The baptism is not like a Christian baptism which occurs shortly after birth. Most baptised Sikhs become so as older children or adults.

The Sikhs who are to be baptised are told of the duties they should perform and the requirements of being a baptised Sikh. This is done in the ceremony of baptism. Five senior Sikhs read out the **Japji** and other prayers and those waiting to be baptised kneel on one knee but raise their right knee. This is a warrior position which indicates readiness to fight if attacked. **Amrit**, (water and sugar mixture) is prepared. Then the senior Sikhs read the **Anand** prayer and the new Sikhs are given the drink which in effect is the baptism. The rest of the Amrit is sprinkled onto the faces and hands of the Sikhs and they are given the name **Singh**, (**Kaur** for females). From then on the Sikhs have a greater responsibility than non-baptised Sikhs to defend the faith and support the other members of the congregation. They are part of the Brotherhood and will live according to the Sikh scriptures and the 5 Ks.

Sikhs are expected to rise early in the morning and spend time praying and meditating to prepare them for the day ahead and to reinforce their beliefs. This prayer can happen either at the Gurdwara but is more often observed at home. Sikhs have a duty to educate others in the way of religion but are not asked to force it on them. Their way of life is expected to be of honesty, and hard work, taking care not to inadvertently make others suffer, and helping those in need.

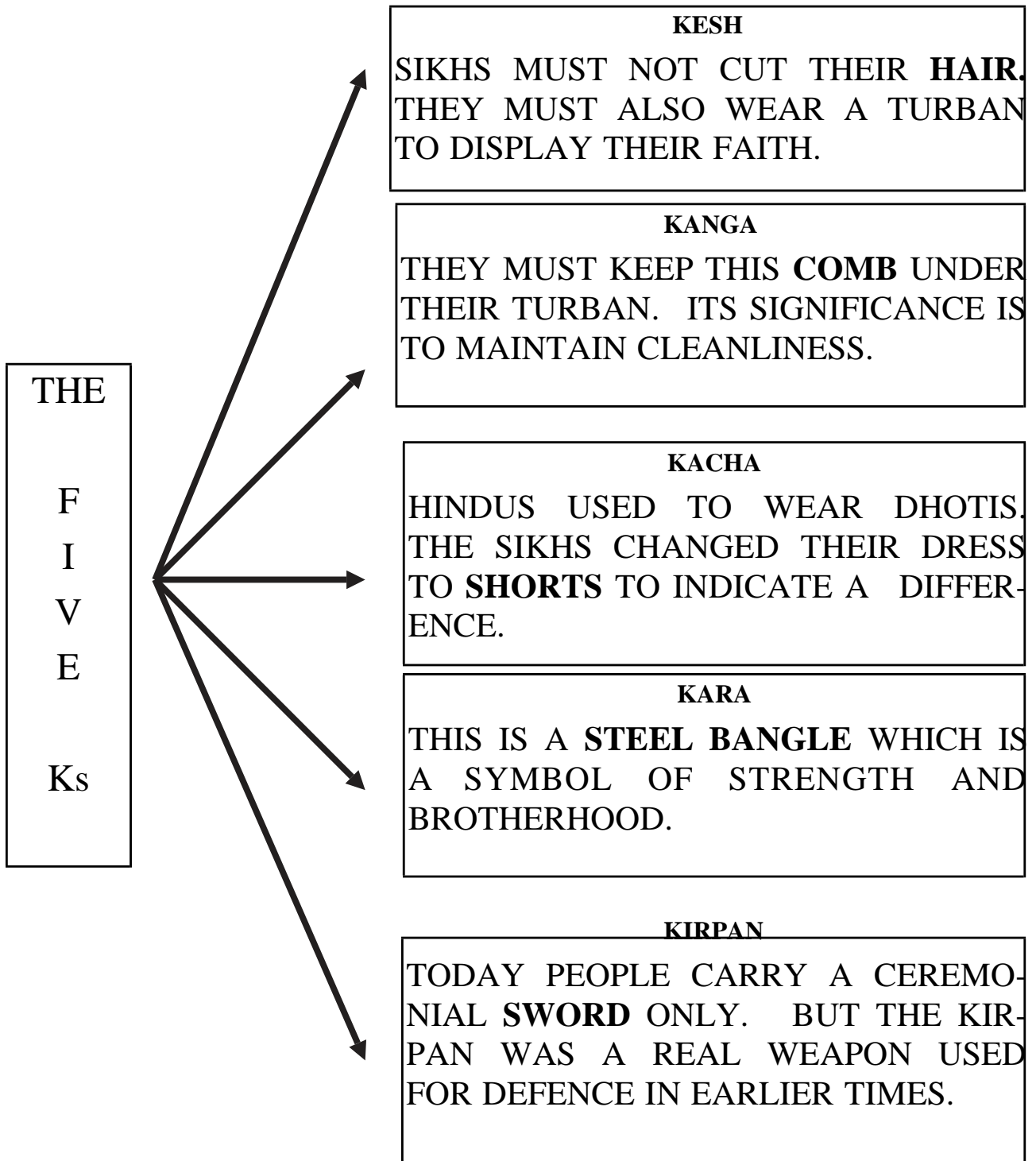
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### QUESTIONS

What are the main features in a Sikh baptism?

How do the duties of Sikhs compare to other religions?

## THE FIVE Ks





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## FESTIVALS

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Like all religions Sikhism has many festivals and ceremonies. Here the main and most popular are listed.

**Baisakhi** is a festival of the Sikh New Year and is held on April 13th each year. At this time in India it is the beginning of the harvest. Besides celebrating the harvest, Baisakhi is celebrated because it was on this day in 1699 that Guru Gobind created the **Khalsa**, or brotherhood. Many people wait until this time to be baptised. This date also has other events which are remembered. The British army massacred over 2,000 unarmed Sikhs at Amritsar in 1919 in the infamous **Jallianwala Bhag** incident when British General, Dyer ordered his troops to open fire on a demonstration.

**Diwali** is a festival for Sikhs and Hindus. Hindus call it the festival of light and light also plays a part in the Sikh celebration. It is the date when Guru Har Gobind was released from prison by the Moghuls and the Golden Temple was lit up with many lights. Its significance is a celebration of freedom.

**Hola Mohalla** is held in March and is celebrated by all Sikhs. The largest gathering is usually in **Anandpur** in the Panjab where there is a huge fair with mock battles and shows of military skill and strength.

**Gurpurs** celebrate many events. With ten Gurus and many famous warriors there are always many events to celebrate. On these occasions special services may be held in Gurdwaras or there may be processions led by the **Panch Piaras** and the **Guru Granth Sahib**. These happen throughout the year.

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## QUESTIONS

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How do Sikh festivals compare to Hindu festivals? After all some are held on the same day in each religion and seem to be similar.

Why are festivals important to all religions?

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## BIRTH

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After the birth of a child the mother will visit the Gurdwara to 'introduce' the new life to the faith. In the case of boys, names are chosen in a ceremony, but girls names are sometimes chosen by the family. The family of the new child will offer a **Ramallah**, (cloth to cover the Granth), and may bring the ingredients for the **Kara Parshad**, (a sweet, blessed during the service, given to all the congregation at the end of a service).

In the naming ceremony, the child will be given a drop of Amrit and the mother will also drink. Amrit is water which is blessed by being placed near the Granth during services. Then the **Ardas** prayer is read. After this the Granth is opened at random and the child must be named with the first letter of the first word which appears on the page. Taking this letter the child's family may choose any name. Part of the history behind this comes from when Guru Gobind was baptising new Sikhs, they all had to be given new names which ended with Singh. Until this time these people would have had mainly Hindu names. To give variety and difference a method of choosing random letters from the Granth seemed to be a good idea.

Once the name has been chosen it is declared to the congregation. Girls are often not named in this way. Part of the reason behind this must be sexism. Historically girls have been baptised much less often than boys although there have been some famous women Sikhs including warriors. Girls who are not named at the Gurdwara are named by their family at home and the name declared in the Gurdwara during services.

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## QUESTIONS

Why is it important to formally name a child rather than naming it at home?

Why is the child not baptised as Christian children might be, at a very early age?

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## DEATH

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As in some other religions Sikhs believe that death is not an end but merely the beginning of another phase. Sikhs are taught not to be broken hearted by death but inevitably there is sorrow. Sikhs believe that depending on the deeds of the person during their life their soul will either go to join God or be re-born in a better or worse situation than their present life.

Sikhs are always cremated when they die and are never buried. The body is washed and the the 5 Ks are symbolically placed on the person. There is a service at the Gurdwara and the then body is cremated.

The ashes of the body are often released into rivers. The immediate family will be visited by other family members and services will be held at the Gurdwara for the soul to find happiness. Often the family will hold a ceremony called **Akhand Path** which is the reading of the whole of the Granth which takes two days. During this time the family members spend most of their time at the Gurdwara and have Langar available for worshippers who come.

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## QUESTIONS

What do Sikhs believe happens to the soul after death?

How do the Sikh beliefs compare to the beliefs held in other religions?

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## MARRIAGE

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Marriage in Sikhism is about the joining of two people and two souls. Marriages are largely arranged, and parents look for similarities in disposition, wealth, outlook, and religious commitment. There is an engagement ceremony once the two families have agreed that there is enough in common for the partnership to happen.

The girl's parents visit the boy's parents home with gifts. The gifts vary depending on how religious the families are. In some case the gifts may be in the form of jewellery and sweet foods. For more religious families they may bring the boy a small ceremonial sword or a Kara, (steel bangle), amongst other things. Some people celebrate the engagement with a party, others by reading the **Ardas** from the Granth.

The wedding itself is held at the Gurdwara. The bridegroom and his family travel to the Gurdwara nearest the bride's house and first take tea and refreshments in the Langar Hall. Then the bride and bridegroom sit before the Granth at the front of the congregation. The ceremony involves the couple being told what their responsibilities will be as a married couple and then they have to walk around the Granth four times and each time return to their place at the front of the congregation to listen to the scriptures being read. After the fourth time they are married. Often people take this opportunity to talk to the Sangat, (congregation), and the couple, about the importance of the religion and the responsibilities of marriage.

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## QUESTIONS

How are Sikh marriages arranged?

Sikhs believe in the marriage of two people and two souls. What does this mean?

How do the responsibilities of the couple change once they are married?

## Topics In World Religions