



Los Angeles County  
Department of Community and Senior Services  
Commission on Human Relations  
3175 W. Sixth Street, Ste. 400, Los Angeles, CA 90020  
(213) 738-2788

*Fostering* harmonious and equitable  
intergroup relations  
*Empowering* communities and institutions  
to engage in non-violent conflict resolution  
*Promoting* an informed and inclusive  
multicultural society

## FACT SHEET ON SIKHS

### Why produce a fact sheet about Sikhs?

After the terrorist attacks of September 11th, 2001, the Commission analyzed the reports of hate crime in Los Angeles County, and found that many Sikhs had been targeted by anti-Muslim/Middle Eastern hate crime and discrimination. There were also many reports of workplace discrimination against Sikhs in the post-September 11th period. The victimization of Sikhs emphasized the need to educate the public about Sikhs in the United States, their beliefs, and their customs.

### Why were Sikhs targets of hate and discrimination in the U.S. after the September 11th terrorist attacks?

It appears that the perpetrators of hate crimes after September 11th mistakenly associated turbaned, bearded Sikh men with Osama Bin Laden because Bin Laden wore a turban and beard. Sikhs are people whose religion is totally different and separate from the Muslim faith. And because it is a religion and not an ethnicity, people from a variety of ethnic groups consider themselves Sikhs.

### When did the Sikh faith, known as Sikhism, come into being?

Sikhism was founded by Guru Nanak around 1500 AD in Punjab, a state in Northwest India.

### How many people are of the Sikh faith?

Sikhism is the fifth-largest religion in the world with over 25 million followers about 750,000 of whom live in the United States.

### Why do they call themselves "Sikh"?

The word "Sikh" means disciple or student. Sikhs are students and followers of *Guru Nanak* and the nine *Gurus* (divinely inspired prophet-teachers) who succeeded him.

### Do Sikhs have a holy book or scripture?

Though sometimes mistaken for members of a sect of Hinduism or Islam, Sikhs belong to a distinct religion with its own unique divine scripture called the *Guru Granth Sahib*, considered to be the eternal spiritual *Guru* of the Sikhs. The *Gurus* wrote the holy text themselves without the use of any intermediaries.

### Why do some Sikhs wear turbans?

Historically, Guru Gobind Singh (the 10th and final Sikh Guru) wanted to make a bold statement about the identities of Sikhs following years of persecution and the martyrdom of his predecessor. Keeping long hair wrapped in a turban is an outward symbol of a Sikh's submission and devotion to God. The Sikh code of conduct, the *Rehat Maryada*, prohibits removing the five Sikh articles of faith--including the turban

and *kirpan* (ceremonial sword) discussed below--from one's person. Some Sikhs are more relaxed about these rules than others, but to many Sikhs it is a religious command they absolutely must follow.

### **Why do some Sikhs carry knives?**

Carrying a kirpan (a small ceremonial knife or dagger) is symbolic of the religious teaching that Sikhs are ready to defend the weak and the poor at all times. As discussed above, carrying a kirpan is one of the Sikh's five articles of faith that they are commanded to follow. Although like any religion, not all adherents follow the rules strictly, strict adherents to Sikhism would consider the kirpan a religious requirement.

### **Why are Sikhs of different racial backgrounds?**

The practice of Sikhism is not limited to people originating in North India. Sikhism is open to any person--regardless of race or ethnicity--who is moved to follow the religion.

### **How do Sikhs see other religions?**

The founders of the Sikh faith strongly believed in religious tolerance and freedom. A person's particular religion was of less importance than the daily practice of remembering God and leading a life of service and integrity.

### **What are the central spiritual tenets in which Sikhs believe?**

Sikh spiritual beliefs:

§ Sikhs believe in a monotheistic God (one God) that is all powerful, all-knowing, without form, and without gender.

§ Sikhs believe the infinite spirit of God is within all things and all people.

§ Sikhs believe God can be directly accessed through meditation.

§ Sikhs believe in complete gender and social equality in all spheres of life: political, social, and religious.

§ Sikhs do not blindly embrace rituals. They believe that the way to lead a spiritual life is to keep God in your heart and mind at all times, live honestly, work hard, be generous to the less fortunate, and serve others (*seva*).

### **Do the Sikhs have a holy book?**

Yes, the Sikh scripture is called the Guru Granth Sahib.

### **What do Sikhs call their religious centers?**

The Sikh temple is called a Gurdwara. There are more than 300 in the United States. More than just a house of worship, the Gurdwara is a Sikh cultural and community center. All Gurdwaras have a kitchen where food (*langar*) is prepared and served to all without charge. Although Sikhs are not required to be vegetarian, only vegetarian food is served in the Gurdwaras. This ensures that all visitors to the Gurdwara, whatever the dietary restrictions of their faith, can partake in a meal.

**Educate yourself** and others. The following web sites offer more information:

[www.sikhcoalition.org](http://www.sikhcoalition.org)

[www.sikhnet.com](http://www.sikhnet.com)

[www.sikheducation.org](http://www.sikheducation.org)

[www.saldef.org](http://www.saldef.org)