

Ek Onkar: “One Om” “One God or Creator”: A look into the religion of Sikhism



Sermon by Reverend Rebecca M. Bryan

November 19, 2023

I dedicate this sermon to my teachers Sally Coate and Sat Tara; and to their teachers, among them, Snam Kaur, Satpurkh, Abhai Raj, and Gwir Llewellyn; and to the lineage of their teachers including Guru Nanak, the founder of Sikhism, and to Shabad Guru, the healing power of sound and music. May my words honor your teachings and may my errors in what I share be forgiven.

And I dedicate this sermon and service to you, my friends, in honor of your deep intellectual and heartfelt interest in learning about world religions, your commitment to the belief that revelation is not sealed, and our collective commitment to love, peace, and justice, and love of community, music, and connection. Sikh beliefs are in line with our annual ministry theme of interconnectedness and highlight a lesser known and understood religion as we study diversity.

Today's service is the first of two worship services. The second service will be Sunday, January 21, 2024, when we will be joined by Gwir and Abhai Raj Llewellyn from the Millis Ashram, a Sikh Ashram in Millis, MA. Gwir and Abhai Raj will speak and play music based on the work of Valerie Karr and her book, *See No Stranger*. We're also going to have a free yoga offering and yogi refreshments in the Lower Meetinghouse on Saturday morning, January 6, 2024, so that you can also experience some of their embodied practices.

Much of what I share today is taken from the work of Simran Jeet Singh, Executive Director of the Aspen Institute's Religion and Society Program, professor of religion and history at Union Theological Seminary, author, and dad.¹ His most recent book is entitled *The Light We Give*.

Simran Jeet Singh and his brother grew up in San Antonio, Texas. Their parents came to the United States as immigrants from Punjab, a region in South Asia that covers northwestern India and

¹ Simran Jeet Singh, *The Light We Give: How Sikh Wisdom Can Transform Your Life* (New York: Riverhead Books, 2022).

modern-day Pakistan. They spoke Punjabi, one of the most widely spoken languages in the world and eat Punjabi food, including rooti, traditional Indian flatbread, daal, lentil curry, and choley, which is chickpea curry.

“Sikhi” is the original Punjabi word for their tradition, which is also referred to as “Sikhism.” It is pronounced sick, like English “sick,” meaning not well. The pronunciation “Seekism” is a result of colonization.

Sikhism is the 5th largest world religion, with 33 million believers. Eighty-nine percent of Sikhs live in India, 3 percent live in Canada, 2.2 percent live in the United Kingdom, and 1.2 percent live in the United States.

It is also the youngest of world religions, starting only 500 years ago. Its founder, Guru Nanak, was born to Hindu parents in 1469. As a young boy, Nanak saw everything as interconnected and was disturbed by the unhappiness and inequity he saw in the world. He grew up and established a way of living that revolves around spiritual practice, ethical living, and selfless giving. His community was based on the principles of equality, humility, integrity, service, and love.

The turban that female and male Sikhs wear represent those values. The turbans are also a visible symbol of their commitment to peace and nonviolence. They wear them to let others know that they will stand up and intervene for peace.

Music has a unique and powerful role in Sikhism. They believe that sound is itself a guru, or teacher, that helps us move from darkness to light. Whenever I would feel emotional, my teacher would encourage me to play harmonium, passing on the wisdom her teacher taught her: “Turn your emotion to devotion.” Traditional Sikh music is called Kirtan.

Guru Nanak's following grew rapidly. He appointed Guru Angad as his successor. Following Guru Angad's death there was a succession of 10 gurus. Their final guru, Guru Gobind Singh, died in 1708. At the time of his death, he gave authority to the community of committed and

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initiative Sikhs (Guru Khalsa Panth) and their scriptural text, the Guru Granth Sahib. This text includes 6,000 hymns and texts taken from the Sikh Gurus as well as other early and medieval saints from diverse religions and castes.

As our guests who are coming in January told me, Sikhi is Universalist. Sikhs do not believe in hell so the threats that they are going to hell, which they often receive in America, do not worry them.

Since its inception, "...the Sikh tradition has sought to smash power inequities and to democratize access to personal happiness for all."²

Sikhs believe that our ultimate goal in life is to love. They also believe that our values must be followed by actions and that practice is what leads to embodiment. Their belief is that we become what we do.

Sikhs' fundamental belief is that the entire world is interconnected. They teach of *seva*, which considers every act of kindness essential with one act of kindness building upon the previous one.

Simran Jeet Singh writes that his belief in *seva* helps him to balance the need to stand up to injustice and act for peace, with the equally important need to live in connection, joy, and equanimity.

He calls the prevailing culture in America "performing outrage," writing "...our culture of performing outrage demands an impossible standard, making us feel like imposters if we don't try to fix every problem, or at least pretend to."³ Sikhs teach that every act matters, and that we can only do what we can do, maximizing our gifts and recognizing our limitations.

Sikhs are too often confused with Arabs, South Asians, and Muslims. Hate crimes and murders in the Sikh community escalated after 9/11 and again, now, as Islamophobia is heightened in our country. This is part of what led Simran Jeet Singh to write his book. You can imagine that as a brown-skinned, turban-wearing, young boy, he was regularly on the receiving end of racism.

2 Singh, *The Light We Give*.
3 *The Light We Give*.

For years, he responded to that ever-present experience by either trying to diminish it with humor or fight it with loud vitriol.

As these episodes escalated over the last seven years, he realized that his traditional tactics were not working. He found himself angry and bitter. He saw that intellectual arguments were not changing the hearts or minds of those who hated him for looking different.

Not knowing where else to turn for answers, he turned to Sikhism, the faith of his family and ancestors. He recognized that although he knew many of the Sikh prayers and teachings by heart, he needed to go deeper. He returned to his childhood faith with hope and trepidation. What if it didn't provide answers?

When I heard him speak this summer, he talked about this, saying, "We all face our own challenges. How do we make a choice in each of these moments where we will walk away feeling proud?"⁴ Neither fight nor flight work. "If I can't control how people treat me, I can control how I respond," he said.⁵

His study of his childhood religion began with the concept of Ek Onkar, the first concept in the Guru Granth Sahib, the Sikh sacred text. In broad translation, Ek Onkar means radical connectedness. More literally, Ek or Ik means "one" or the "oneness of the world" and Onkar is the "dynamic, divine forces that permeate every aspect of our world."

Simran Jeet Singh knew, however, that an intellectual understanding of these precepts alone would not bring changes into his life. He dedicated himself to several daily practices designed to allow him to experience Ek Onkar, or radical inclusivity, with life.

First, he articulated his top five values, and began setting daily intentions to act in accordance with those values. He reviewed how he was doing with those intentions on a regular basis. He also began practicing gratitude, being intentionally kind, and looking for others who were being kind. "Being kind to others makes them happy

4 *The Light We Give*.
5 *The Light We Give*.

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and makes you happier too.”⁶ He wrote that it’s about “finding goodness in the moments that are designed to bring out the worst in us.”⁷ When he feels overwhelmed, he turns off his devices, goes outside, and watches for acts of kindness.

Sikhs pray every day for the uplifting of humanity and for chardi kala, which means everlasting optimism. “...if we can do that during the most difficult of times, imagine what we can do with daily frustrations,” says Simran Jeet Singh.⁸

Every morning when he puts on his turban, he reminds himself of his values. “By wrapping the turban around my head every day I’m thinking of the values: love, service, justice and I wear it like a public announcement.”⁹

Sikhism teaches how to travel though life embodied and with wisdom and how to respond to challenges in ways that are consistent with our core values. Let’s not romanticize Sikhs, however. They are real and flawed people like all of us. They have their mistakes and histories. Today is about learning and respecting all people. Learning is an important form of proximity. As we learn, we see others who are different.

This seeing is what Simran Jeet Singh calls the antidote to the culture of fear and anger we live in today. “For those of us who live in marginalized communities, changing the culture of fear is the only option... Being hated feels isolating. Having company makes it bearable,” he writes.¹⁰

I’ll close with words from the Sikh sacred text, written by Bhagat Kabir, “Hey people! Hey, siblings! Don’t be deluded. The Creator is in the Creation and the Creation is in the Creator—completely permeating all spaces.”

I invite you now to reflect upon these concepts of peace, radical interconnectedness, and the oneness of all, by listening to Snatam Kaur sing “Ek Onkar.” As you take in the sound and her words, contemplate on your values and how you

can embody these values, knowing that what we do becomes who we are.

Amen.

Listen to music...

May it be so.

Please rise in body or spirit and join in our closing hymn, “Let There Be Peace on Earth.” The words are in your Order of Service.

6 *The Light We Give.*

7 *The Light We Give.*

8 *The Light We Give.*

9 *The Light We Give.*

10 *The Light We Give.*