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COMMON STEREOTYPES AND MISCONCEPTIONS ABOUT SIKHS AND SIKHISM

1. Sikhs are Arabs or Muslims.

Sometimes it is difficult for people from the Western Hemisphere to distinguish between different groups of people from the east. While it is true that some Muslims wear turbans, the majority of people in the United States wearing a turban are Sikhs. Sikh males, and some females, wear a turban as per the mandatory requirement of their faith. The turban keeps their long, uncut hair neat and covered at all times. Muslims, even those who wear turbans cut their hair. While orthodox Muslim males wear a particular style of trimmed beard, an adult Sikh male's beard is full and uncut. In addition, Sikhs do not profess the Muslim religion.

2. Sikhism is a Hindu sect or Sikhs are Hindus.

Sikhism and Hinduism are distinctly separate religions. Most Hindus are henotheist, i.e. worship a god/goddess from a large pantheon of deities. Sikhs believe in the equality of all persons of both genders, do not believe one day to be more auspicious than another, and worship One un-incarnated, timeless God Who is beyond birth and death. These are but a few of the fundamental differences in philosophy and practice between the two groups.

3. Sikhism is based on Hinduism and Islam.

Sikhism originated in the teachings of Guru Nanak who realized that rituals, religious legalism, and much religious practice current in his time did not lead to a realization of God, or to a relationship with God, which Nanak believed is the goal of every life.

4. Sikhism was created to defend Hindus or Hinduism.

Sikhism was not created to defend any religious group. Pressure from government sources during the times of the last six Gurus led to the development of a Sikh army for self-defense. A Sikh is taught to stand against injustice from whatever source and to defend the weak and downtrodden, no matter what their religious affiliation.

5. Sikhs are a martial race. Sikhs are violent people.

The "martial race" theory is a colonial construct that was created and propagated by the British who recruited large numbers of so called "martial races," the Sikhs, Gurkhas, Rajputs, etc., for service in the British army

6. Khalsa means "pure".

The word *Khalsa* means both "pure" and "belonging only to God". When a committed Sikh is initiated he or she becomes a member of a spiritual order called *Khalsa*. A

Khalsa belongs only to God.

7. Sikhs don't eat beef.

Sikhs may eat any type of meat including beef. Some Sikhs choose not to eat beef for cultural reasons. Others may be vegetarian, and not consume any animal products including eggs, for personal reasons. Sikhs do not have any dietary restrictions other than a prohibition from eating foods prepared in a religiously-mandated ritualistic fashion, like Muslim "*halal*" meat or Jewish *Kosher* food. Also, Sikhs must not eat food that has been offered to idols.

8. Sikhs are allowed to drink.

The Sikh Code of Conduct states, "A Sikh must not take hemp, opium, liquor, tobacco, or any intoxicant." At the time of initiation, a Sikh vows not to use any intoxicant. Drinking alcohol is forbidden for Sikhs.

9. The Sikh kirpan is a weapon. Sikh men hide kirpans in their turbans.

The *kirpan* is one of the five mandatory articles of Sikh faith. It is mandatory for *Khalsa*, initiated (baptized) Sikhs, to wear the kirpan. The kirpan represents a Sikhs' commitment to protect the weak and to promote justice. Sikh men DO NOT hide the kirpan in their turban. The kirpan is commonly worn in a cloth holster on the right shoulder under one's clothing.

10. Women are subservient to men.

Sikhism recognizes the complete equality between men and women in all spheres of life. In order that Sikhs would not follow the prevailing system which divided people into immutable castes, the 10th Sikh *Guru*, Gobind Singh, gave all Sikh women the last name "Kaur" (meaning princess) and all Sikh men the last name "Singh" (meaning lion). Also, Sikh women are not required to take their fathers' or husbands' last names.

11. Sikhs are required to practice yoga. Yoga is an integral part of Sikhism.

Yoga is not an inherent or required Sikh religious practice. Some American followers of Sikhism do practice yoga, which, they believe, aids their practice of Sikhism.

12. Sikhs came to North America within the past 20 years.

Sikh men began coming to the US and Canada in the late 1890's to work in agriculture and lumber. In the US, discriminatory anti-Asian laws did not allow Asian immigrant men's wives and children to immigrate. These laws were repealed in 1965. From that date, the arrival of wives and children with Sikh immigrants has increased the number of Sikhs in the US to 500,000 currently. Sikhs have come into wider notice in the general population especially since the terrorist attacks of 9/11, in the aftermath of which, many Sikhs suffered hate-related violent backlash.