

Sacred Threads

Lesson 5: Sikhism and Syncretism

3.17.2019

Objectives: Explore Sikhism in relation to Hinduism and Islam, and modern struggle for identity.

Materials: Flipchart, blank cards, lesson attachment, YouTube access/flat screen.

Time allotments suggested for 50 minute class, followed by 25 minute closing service.

1. Nametags and Graffiti Wall (5 minutes before class begins)

- Make nametags using blank paper, markers, and holders. Youth can create their own unique but LEGIBLE nametag. Make it a regular practice to wear nametags.
- “Graffiti Wall” questions: Write the following on whiteboard. Invite youth as they arrive to grab a marker and weigh in with their responses:
 - ▶ What’s your favorite “fusion food,” cuisine that combines elements from different culinary traditions?
 - ▶ Is your identity shaped by more than one culture? Which ones?
- Teachers complete attendance sheets.

2. Silly Fun: Guess Who? (5 minutes max)

Give each youth 2 blank cards to write 2 little known facts about themselves. (Teachers included, too!) For example: *I was born exactly at midnight, I am ambidextrous, I have gone hiking in the Swiss Alps.* Teacher collects and mixes cards in a basket, then draws one card at a time and reads aloud for youth to guess whose fact it is. (Please don’t guess aloud if it’s your own card!) See who can guess the most correctly.

3. Chalice Lighting: Light the chalice, saying these words together: “We light this chalice as a symbol of our faith; the light of truth and the warmth of love.”

Teacher reads: (from former minister of India, Preneet Kaur)

“The turban is an inextricable part of the Sikh identity. Sikhs say you may take off their head but not the turban.”

4. **Mixing it up** (5 minutes)

Ask youth to consider different types of mixing or fusions listed below. With each example, determine whether the fusion creates: (1) something that you would **expect** (2) something **wonderfully new** (3) something that **does not work** and spoils the original items.

Take a survey with show of hands, and invite quick comments for each choice:

- Peanut butter and jelly sandwich
- California pizza (combines New York and Italian thin crust with toppings from California cuisine, like pineapple and avocado)
- Mock Peking Duck (made with Tofu instead of duck)
- Yoga pants with a skirt
- Coat and tie with shorts
- Santa Claus and Birth of Jesus
- Catholic monks/nuns who practice Buddhist meditation

5. **Sikhism and Syncretism** (5 minutes)

Teacher summarizes and helps explain religious syncretism: Religions are often a coming together of different beliefs and practices, especially when religions travel to other cultures. Such merging is an example of **syncretism**. And there has always been intense debate about syncretism:

- Is it a corruption of an original, pure religion?
- Is there such a thing as an original “pure” religion?
- What kind of mixing is it? (Is it more *adoption/assimilation ... or adaptation/acculturation ... or integration/emergence* of something entirely new?)

Note the historical **interreligious** context of Islam and Hinduism:

- Circa 1500CE, Sikhism is founded by Guru Nanak, a Hindu growing up with Muslims in the Punjab area of eastern Pakistan and northern India (see attached map). Living in permanent contact with Hinduism and Islam, he was neither convinced nor converted to one or the other. Guru Nanak famously proclaimed, “*I am not a Hindu, nor am I a Muslim.*”
- Sikhs (from *sisya* meaning “disciple/ student”) largely accept Hindu cosmology but also adhere to the monotheism of Islam. Sikhs reject Hindu asceticism and the caste system, but also reject Islam’s limiting the nature of God to terms like “Allah.”
- Throughout their history, Sikhs have faced violent oppression from both Muslims and Hindus, forcing them to take militant stands to defend their faith. Muslim control of

the Punjab region led Sikhs in 1699 to form a class of warriors. And when the British gave India independence in 1947, the Punjab was divided between India and Pakistan. 2.5 million Sikhs were forced to leave their home in Pakistan to move to India.

- Sikhs acknowledge both similarities and differences with Hinduism and Islam, but most Sikhs reject the notion that their faith is a syncretistic mixture of Islam and Hinduism. They emphasize that they have their own scriptures and practices, independent of Hinduism and Islam.

6. Video: “The Story of the Turban” (25 minutes, stop at 25:10 minutes)

Watch the BBC documentary which aired April 2012 in the UK. Since terrorist attacks of the 21st century, Sikhs believe that a case of mistaken religious identity has singled them out for discrimination. The documentary traces the history of the turban as a crucial symbol of Sikh faith and the ongoing challenge to preserve their religious identity:

- <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=e9PQ2kp-z-o>

7. Question for Discussion (10 minutes)

- While debate continues whether Sikhism is syncretistic or not, there is agreement that it has been shaped by Hinduism and Islam. So in that same manner, why wouldn't Sikhs simply include British culture to shape their faith as well, and simply remove the turban? **In other words, when does a religious identity remain firm or adapt?**
- Many people think UU faith is simply about picking and choosing or “customizing” their own religion to whatever one's preference. If so, would UUs ever feel a strong need to stand firm and risk their life for their faith? What would make you risk your life for the UU faith?
- Just as not all syncretistic mixings and fusions are desirable, what else may help guide the shaping of religion other than simply picking and choosing? (*Hint: community of others, reason, tradition, prayer and study, etc.*)

8. Extinguish the chalice, saying together: *“May the light of truth and the warmth of love go with us in our hearts.”*

9. Help clean up classroom before leaving: Please keep regular practice of readying classroom for the next class.

- leave lesson plan and all materials organized
- wipe the whiteboard clean
- tables and chairs neatly returned
- nametags collected in Ziploc bag
- leave any comments for RE staff on attendance sheets