

Faith was founded on peace

# Violence obscures Sikhs origin

By STANLEY OZIEWICZ

The violence that has erupted in India over Punjabi autonomy and Sikh religious rights has obscured the fact that, in its infancy Sikhism, one of the world's youngest faiths, was based on peace, tolerance and reconciliation.

The faith's founder, Nanak, was born to Hindu parents in the mid-fifteenth century about 48 kilometres from Lahore in present-day Pakistan. According to Sikh tradition, God appeared to Nanak, who later set off with a friend to journey to what is now north-west India, eventually reaching the Punjab where groups of Sikh disciples began to form.

Monotheism, the belief that there is only one God, is the basic message that Nanak and his followers preached. This coincides with Moslem conviction while other doctrines agree with aspects of Hinduism. This syncretism, or combining of different faiths, is often cited as a feature of Sikhism, although some scholars argue it is not simply an offshoot of the two older religions.

According to John B. Noss, writing in the sixth edition of *Man's Religions*, Nanak believed that religion has a social mission to perform, to improve the lot of all men, and that his creed and practice were conciliatory and peaceful.

"The good man and the good Sikh," Mr. Noss writes of Nanak's theme, "is pure in motive and in act, prefers the virtuous, seeks brotherhood with high and low without regard to caste, craves the guru's word and all divine knowledge as man craves food, loves his wife and renounces all other women, avoids quarrelsome topics, is not arrogant, does not trample on others, and forsakes evil company, associating only with the holy."

Nanak died in 1538. He was succeeded by nine gurus who set up sangats (congregations) and langars (community kitchens with free common meals).

Mr. Noss writes that beginning with the fifth guru, Guru Arjan (1581-1606), Sikhism began to adopt a militant self-defence posture, arising partly as a result of pressure from Moslem authorities.

Mr. Arjan was followed by his son, Har Govind, answering his father's challenge to "sit fully armed upon his throne, maintain an army to the best of his ability" by building the first Sikh stronghold.

"The Sikhs were no longer, from the Moslem point of view, an inconveniently close-knit yet otherwise harmless sect; they were a



The death of radical Sikh leader Jarnail Singh Bhindranwale during army invasion of the sacred Golden Temple in Amritsar touched off a string of violent protests.

political and social reality that menaced the balance of power in northwest India," Mr. Noss says. "So the Moslems began to bestir themselves. And the Sikhs on their part found in themselves the qualities of fighting men."

Govind Singh, or Govind the Lion, (1675-1708) pushed the militancy further by propagating the idea of a separate Sikh state where Sikhs would declare and defend the truth.

Govind Singh instituted the Khalsa, a baptism of the sword. Those baptized were obliged to wear the five Ks: the Kesh, long uncut hair; the Kangha, a comb; the Kachh, short pants; the Kara, a steel bracelet; and the Kirpan, the sword or dagger.

Out of their reverence to one god, spartan clean-living and physical strength grew as did the Sikh's legendary prowess, which was later exploited by British colonial administrators.

As happened in other faiths, sects quickly developed, some moderate, others extreme fundamentalist. Jarnail Singh Bhindranwale, who died in the battle at the Golden Temple in Amritsar, as a youth joined an extremist sect that propounded its pure version of the faith.

And, as happened in other faiths, religion and politics became inexorably intertwined. A major manifestation of this was in 1947, when more than two million Sikhs were displaced with the creation of Pakistan.

So too, are nationalism and religion joined.

A booklet distributed by the Golden Triangle Sikh Association of Waterloo, Ont., makes this clear:

"Religion and polity, therefore, will always remain inseparable in Sikh ethos. In this context it is important to understand that militancy forms an integral part of Sikhism as is evident from the invocation of the sword as a symbol of 'Shakti' in the opening lines of the Sikh prayer ('The Sword I salute first, To Guru Nanak, then, I bow.')

"And militant trends in Sikh struggle today are not expression of Sikh fundamentalism but flow as a mutual corollary of the growing consciousness of separate Sikh identity and reflect their determination to preserve it."

There are about 14 million Sikhs in India.

The New York Times reports that there are about 500,000 Sikhs in the United States. The Globe and Mail reported this week that about 150,000 live in Canada. This number was provided by the Federation of Sikh Societies of Canada but precise figures are hard to come by.

According to Statistics Canada, 67,710 declared themselves Sikh in the 1981 census. The discrepancy may be explained by the births of children and even more immigrants in the past two years. As well, since their arrival, some Sikhs have shunned the Khalsa symbol of unshorn hair and turban and may have decided against acknowledging their religion to census takers.