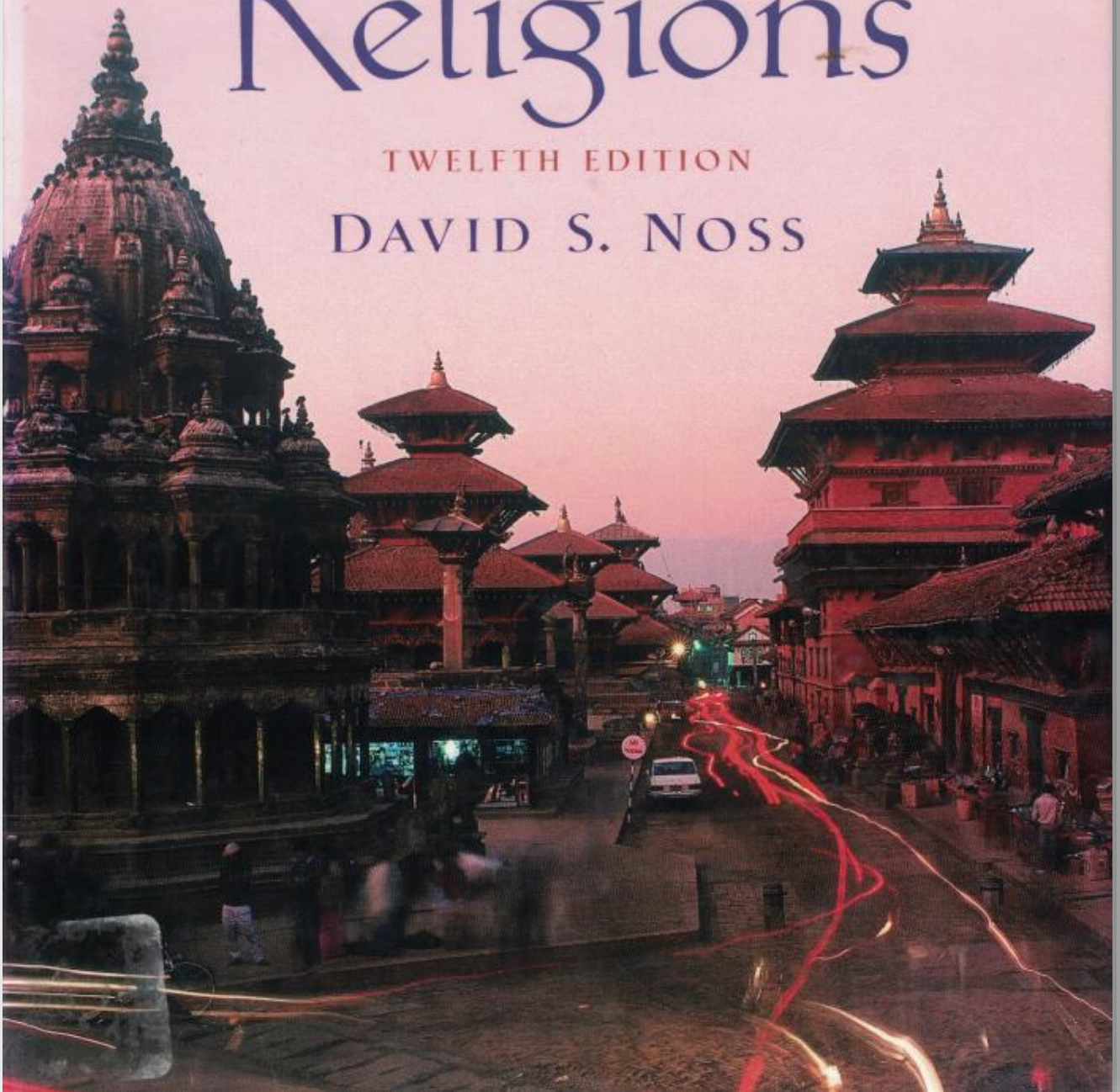


A History of the World's  
**Religions**

TWELFTH EDITION

DAVID S. NOSS



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**WORLD'S RELIGIONS**

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# 8 SIKHISM\*

## A Study in Syncretism

### Facts in Brief

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**FOUNDER:** Nanak, 1469-1538, the first Guru)

**ADHERENTS IN 2006:** 25 million

**PREDECESSOR MOVEMENT:** Kabirpanthis (Kabir, Akali separatist 1440-1518)

**DEITY:** The Name, identified with Allah, Vishnu (theistic), God

**NOTABLE SUCCESSOR GURUS:** Fifth, Arjan, compiler of the *Adi Granth*

Tenth, Govind, founder of the Khalsa (Singhs, Kauras)

**ADHERENTS: (by degree of separatist zeal):**

Akali Dal, revolutionary separatist

Khalsa Dai, separatist

Nanak-panthis (Sahajdhari), Khalsa turbans, beards, and so on not required

**SACRED LITERATURE:** *Adi Granth Granth of the Tenth Guru*

Sikhism is a comparatively young religion; its founding dates only from the fifteenth century. It emerged in northwest India, where for four centuries Hindus and Muslims had lived side by side, sometimes in open conflict, always in uneasy tension. The two traditions strongly influenced each other; unconscious borrowing had taken place despite fervent assertions of distinctness. Sikhism openly drew upon the resources of both communities and managed to develop a character of its own.

Sikhism is not in any absolute sense new. Its basic tenet—monotheism—coincides with Muslim conviction, while the pronounced bhaktic character of its devotional literature and many of the doctrines it professes are in agreement with Hinduism. Indeed, Sikhism is an outstanding example of a successful interweaving of religious traditions (syncretism) and one that has proven stable.

On the other hand, Sikhism is not simply two old religions made one. It is, rather, a genuinely fresh start. Its followers believe it to have been authenticated by a new divine revelation to the founder, **Nanak**. It is therefore felt by its adherents to be the opposite of an intellectual reconstruction of faith arrived at after an academic examination of the articles of older religions.

God—"the True Name"—appeared to Nanak and charged him with a redemptive mission to a divided world. It is thus evident that the religion of the Sikhs is not to be confused with the rationalistic syncretisms whose adherents have been engaged in a reworking of philosophy rather than in a revival of religion in its emotional and ethical completeness.

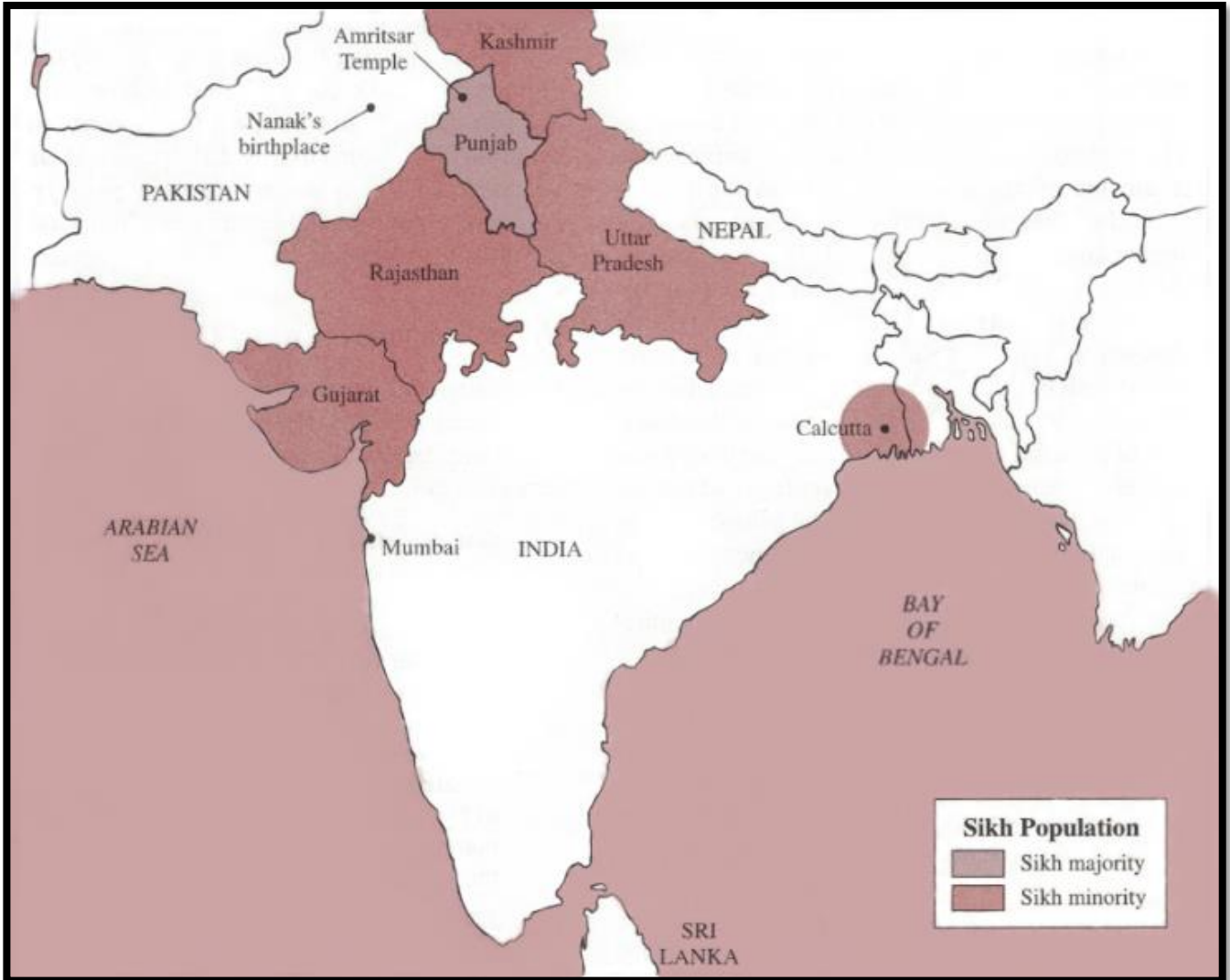
## I. THE LIFE AND WORK OF NANAK

### The Historical Antecedents of Nanak

Before Nanak appeared on the historical scene, the ground was prepared for him by men who had no thought of founding a new religion but who saw a need for cleansing and purifying what seemed to them a decadent Hinduism. Their recurrent efforts at reform were the indirect effects of two developments: (1) the resurgence of the thousand-year-old Bhakti movement in Hinduism, partly as a response to the stimulus of Muslim Sufism, and (2) the severe and militant monotheism of the Muslims.

The Muslims (known in India as Musulmans) had reached India in the eighth century C.E. and in

\*This chapter on Sikhism is placed in this part of the book because it is a South Asian religion. Readers following a chronological approach may wish to read it after reading about Islam in Part 4



time wielded an enormous power. By the eleventh century, they firmly dominated the whole of northwest India, and then, with remorseless pressure, extended their suzerainty over most of India. As early as the twelfth century, a Hindu reformer-poet called Jaidev used the phrase that was to be a key word of Sikhism at a later date. He taught that the practice of religious ceremonials and austerities was of little value compared with "the pious repetition of God's name." This is an Islamic teaching adapted to Hindu use.

Two centuries later, another reformer named Ramananda established a Vaishnavite bhakti sect that sought to purge itself of certain Hindu beliefs and practices. He excited great discussion by "liberating"

himself and his disciples both from accepted Hindu restrictions on social contacts between castes and from prohibitions against meat-eating. But his chief claim to fame today rests upon the fact that he had a follower greater than himself, who in turn won the admiration of the founder of Sikhism.

This disciple—**Kabir**\* (1440—1518)—has given his name to sects still existing in India, the Kabirpanthis (those who follow the path of Kabir). Kabir, reared by Muslims, had a hatred of idols, and, like the Hindu poet Namdev a generation before him, he scorned to believe that God can dwell in an image of stone. He

\*Words in color also appear in the glossary on p. 252.

took no satisfaction in the external forms of religion—rituals, scriptures, pilgrimages, asceticism, bathing in the Ganges, and such—if these were unaccompanied by inward sincerity or morality of life. As a monotheist, he declared that the love of God was sufficient to free anyone of any class or race from the Law of Karma. In other words, the all-sufficient means of bringing an end to reincarnation is the simple, complete love of God that absorbs the soul into the Absolute. He denied the special authority of the Hindu Vedas, wrote in the vernacular rather than in Sanskrit, attacked both Brahmin and Muslim ceremonialists for their barren ritualism, and set up in place of their standards of belief the person of the inspired spiritual leader and teacher (the guru), apart from whom, he held, the right life attitudes cannot be gained. Clearly, a combination of Hindu and Muslim elements appears in Kabir's teaching.

Upon a similar foundation of ethical monotheism Nanak was to rear his own doctrinal position.

## Nanak's Youth

As nearly as the facts can be ascertained, Nanak was born in 1469 C.E. at the village of Talwandi, about thirty miles from Lahore, in present-day Pakistan. His parents were Hindus belonging to a mercantile caste locally called Khatri (probably an offshoot of the ancient Kshatriya caste), but they were comparatively low in the economic scale, his father being a village accountant and farmer. His mother, a pious woman, was very devoted to her husband and son. The town of Talwandi, at the time of the birth of Nanak, was governed by a petty noble named Rai Bular, who was of Hindu stock but had been converted to the Muslim faith. He maintained, however, a tolerant attitude toward the adherents of the old faith and encouraged attempts to reconcile the two creeds. Nanak was in due time to excite his friendly interest.

The stories of Nanak's youth are typical examples of historical fact transmuted into wonder tales. It is said that he was a precocious youth, a poet (bakta) by nature, and so much given to meditation and religious speculation as to be worthless in the capacity of herdsman or storekeeper, two occupations chosen for him by his solicitous parents. His father agreed with some relief to his acceptance of a brother-in-law's offer of a government job in Sultanpur. Nanak set out for the district capital. During business hours he worked, it is

claimed, hard and capably. Meanwhile, he married and had two children, but he spent the evenings singing hymns to his Creator. His friend, the minstrel Mardana, a Muslim who was to have an important part to play in his career, came from Talwandi to join him. Gradually they became the center of a small group of seekers.

## Religious Awakening

Eventually the inward religious excitement of Nanak approached a crisis. There came a decisive experience, which was described over one hundred years later in terms of a vision of God.

*One day after bathing in the river Nanak disappeared in the forest, and was taken in a vision to God's presence. He was offered a cup of nectar, which he gratefully accepted. God said to him, "I am with thee. I have made thee happy, and also those who shall take thy name. Go and repeat Mine, and cause others to do likewise. Abide uncontaminated by the world. Practice the repetition of My name, charity, ablutions, worship, and meditation. I have given thee this cup of nectar, a pledge of My regard."<sup>A1</sup>*

Modern Sikh scholars are convinced that this story is a reconstruction of the original experience by use of symbols of spiritual events, that the cup of nectar was in fact the thrilling revelation of God as True Name, and that the words attributed to God perceptively interpret a profound experience of being called to prophecy. They find in Nanak's own hymns a better account.

*I was a minstrel out of work;  
The Lord gave me employment.  
The Mighty One instructed me:  
"Night and day, sing my praise!"  
The Lord did summon this minstrel  
To his High Court;  
On me He bestowed the robe of honor  
Of those who exalt Him.  
On me He bestowed the Nectar in a Cup,  
The Nectar of His True and Holy Name."<sup>B1</sup>*



### The Poet Kabir

*Brought up near Benares as the son of a poor Muslim weaver, Kabir (1440—1518) is revered as a saint by Hindus, Muslims, and Sikhs, as well as by his own devotees, the Kabir-panthis. His songs in vernacular Hindi reject dogma, caste, asceticism, pilgrimages, and ritual requirements generally, calling for interior devotion free from pride and egoism. (Courtesy of the Bodleian Library, Oxford. MS Douce Or.a2, fol. 14)*

Under the stress of his feelings (a true expression of bhakti) Nanak is said to have then uttered the preamble of the **Japji**, a composition that is silently repeated as a morning devotional rite by every devout Sikh to this day.

There is but one God whose name is True, the Creator, devoid of fear and enmity, immortal, unborn, self-existent, great and bountiful.

The True One was in the beginning, the True One was in the primal age.

The True one is, was, O Nanak, and the True One also shall be.<sup>A2</sup>

After three days, Nanak emerged from the forest.

He remained silent for one day, and the next he uttered the pregnant announcement, "There is no Hindu and no Musalman."<sup>A3</sup>

This was the opening statement of what was to become a wide-ranging campaign of teaching that had as its object the purification and reconciliation of religious faiths.

### Itinerant Campaigning

Setting out on an extended tour of north and west India, which lengthened into years of wandering, he took as his sole companion his friend, the minstrel Mardana, who, while Nanak was singing his evangelistic hymns, played an accompaniment upon a small stringed instrument called a rebeck. The far-traveling pair visited the chief places of Hindu pilgrimage, including Hardwar, Delhi, Benares, the Temple of Jaganatha, and holy places in the Himalaya Mountains. Undaunted by the rebuffs and hostility of religious authorities, Nanak sang and preached in marketplaces, open squares, and on street corners, pausing only to

make a few converts before proceeding on his way, apparently in faith that God, the True Name, would cause the seed he broadcast to spring up and bear fruit of itself. He devised for his own wear a motley garb that at sight proclaimed his attempt to combine the two great faiths. In addition to the Hindu lower garment (dhoti) and sandals

he put on a mango-colored jacket, over which he threw a white safa or sheet. On his head he carried the hat of a Musalman Qalander [mendicant], while he wore a necklace [rosary] of bones, and imprinted a saffron mark on his forehead in the style of the Hindus.<sup>A4</sup>

But it was not until they reached the Punjab that they had any marked success. There groups of Sikhs (literally, disciples) began to form.

According to an interesting but now discredited legend, Nanak took Mardana with him late in life into the heart of the Arab world. In the blue dress of Muslim pilgrims, staff in hand, and carrying cups for their ablutions and carpets for prayer, they are said eventually to have reached Mecca after many months. We are asked to believe

when the Guru arrived, weary and footsore, he went and sat in the great mosque where pilgrims were engaged in their devotions. His disregard of Moslem customs soon involved him in difficulties. When he lay down to sleep at night he turned his feet toward the Kaaba. An Arab priest kicked him and said, "Who is this sleeping infidel? Why hast thou, O sinner, turned thy feet towards God?" The Guru replied, "Turn my feet in the direction in which God is not." Upon this the priest seized the Guru's feet and dragged them in the opposite direction.<sup>A5</sup>

To return to more reliable data, at Kartarpur, Mardana fell ill and died. He had grown old and was wearied out with wandering. Nanak, now sixty-nine years old, did not long survive him. Knowing his end was drawing near, and with his eye on the future growth of his following of Sikhs, he made a decision that was to have far-reaching consequences. He appointed a disciple, Angad, to be his successor.

In October 1538, he lay down to die. The tradition says that Sikhs, Hindus, and Muslims gathered round him, mourning together. The Muslims, so runs the tale (which also is told of Kabir), said they would bury him after his death; the Sikhs of Hindu extraction said they would cremate him. When they referred the matter to the Guru, he said, "Let the Hindus place flowers on my right, and the Musalmans on my left. They whose flowers are found fresh in the morning may have the disposal of my body." So saying, he drew the sheet over his head and became still. When the sheet was removed the next morning, "there was nothing found beneath it. The flowers on both sides were in bloom."<sup>A6</sup>

Thus, even in death, Nanak reconciled Hindu and Muslim, so says the pious tale.

## II. NANAK'S TEACHING

### Basic Concepts

The doctrinal position of Nanak has a surprisingly simple form, in spite of its blending of the insights of two widely differing faiths. The consistency is due to adherence to a single central concept—the sovereignty of the one God, the Creator.

Nanak called his god the True Name because he meant to avoid any delimiting term for him, like Allah, Rama, Shiva, or Ganesha. He taught that the True Name is manifest in manifold ways and in manifold places and is known by manifold names, but he is eternally one, the sovereign and omnipotent God, at once transcendent and immanent, creator and destroyer. If any name is to be used, let it be one like Hari (the Kindly), which is a good description of his character; for his mercy is inexhaustible, his love greater than his undeviating justice. At the same time, God inscrutably predestines all creatures and ordains that the highest of the creatures, the human being, be served by the lower creations. (This removed the Hindu taboo against meat eating.) In these articles of Nanak's creed a Muslim element is evident.

On the other hand, Nanak subscribed to the Hindu doctrine of **maya**, but he did not give maya the connotation of pure illusion. By it he intended to say



that material objects, even though they have reality as expressions of the Creator's eternal Truth, may build—around those who live wholly, and with desire, in the mundane world—a "wall of falsehood" that prevents them from seeing the truly Real. God, he held, created matter as a veil about himself that only spiritual minds, free of desire, can penetrate. By its mystic power, maya "maketh Truth dark and increaseth worldly attachment."<sup>B2</sup>

*Maya, the mythical Goddess,  
Sprang from the One, and her womb brought forth  
Three acceptable disciples of the One:  
Brahma, Vishnu and Shiva.  
Brahma, it is said, bodies forth the world,  
Vishnu it is who sustains it;  
Shiva the destroyer who absorbs,  
He controls death and judgment.  
God makes them to work as He wills,  
He sees them ever, they see Him not:  
That of all is the greatest wonder.<sup>B3</sup>*

God, ultimately, not maya, is the true creator, by an emission of a Primal Utterance (Word, *Logos*).

*God Himself created the world and Himself gave names to things.  
He made Maya by His power.<sup>A7</sup>*

The world is, then, immediately real, in the sense of made manifest by maya to the senses, but ultimately unreal, because only God is ultimately real. (Here we have a conviction resembling the advaita of Shankara but without the latter's impersonal monism, for to Nanak God is as personal as he was to Ramanuja. See again p. 120.) "The world is very transient, like a flash of lightning"<sup>A8</sup> Nanak sang, and he did not shrink from the parallel thought that humanity is also transient. Retaining the Hindu doctrine of the transmigration of souls, together with its usual corollary the Law of Karma, Nanak warned his hearers not to prolong the round of their births by living apart from God; that is, by choosing through egoism (**haumai**) and sensuous desire life in the world (maya) in preference to ego-abandoning absorption in God. An egocentric life accumulates karma. Let them think

only of God, endlessly repeat his name, and be absorbed into Him; in such absorption alone lies the bliss known to Hindus as Nirvana. For salvation is not going to Paradise after a last judgment, but absorption—an individuality-extinguishing absorption—in God, the True Name.

Like the Sûfi Muslims, Nanak emphasized that God dwells within the world and is in the human heart. Like the *bhakti* Hindus he stressed the primacy of devotion. Sikhs call their path **Nam-** (Name-) **Marg** to distinguish it from the Hindu Karma Marga. To act always in the name and for the sake of God is better, they say, than Karma Marga, which some Hindus tend to follow for self-seeking motives instead of in the spirit of the *Bhagavad Gita*, that is, without thinking of rewards.

## Distrust of Ritual

With deep distrust of ritual and ceremonial, Nanak denounced Hindus and Muslims for going through the forms of worship without really thinking about God. In fact, he felt that ritual was a positive distraction; it turned the current of people's thoughts away from God to mere forms and motions of worship. On every hand he found illustrations of his thesis. In the first Muslim religious service he attended after his call to be the Guru of God, he is said to have laughed aloud at something he noticed in the demeanor of the judge (Qazi) leading a prayer. The Muslims could scarcely wait till the service was over before pouncing on him for an explanation.

*The Guru replied that immediately before prayer the Qazi had unloosed a new-born filly. While he ostensibly performed divine service, he remembered there was a well in the enclosure, and his mind was filled with apprehension lest the filly should fall into it.<sup>A10</sup>*

Because Qazi's mind had wandered, his ritual prayer was not accepted of God, Nanak said.

He felt a similar distrust of Hindu rites, going on pilgrimages, asceticism of the extreme type, and idolatry of any sort.

**"Search not for  
the True One afar off;  
He is in every heart,  
and is known by the Guru's  
Instructions." – Nanak<sup>A9</sup>**

In the last case, he thought not only did idols distract one's thoughts from God's reality, but, as he declared with all but Muslim fervor, God could not be contained in an image of wood or stone. As for pilgrimages, merely repeating the True Name is equal to bathing at the sixty-eight places of pilgrimage. In regard to the ascetic retreat from the world, "Why go searching for God in the forest? I have found Him at home," Nanak cried.<sup>C1</sup>

### Social Mission

Nanak believed that religion has a social mission to perform, a mission to improve the lot of people of all classes and societies. He criticized yogins, sadhus, sannyasins, and other Hindus like them for running away from the problems of life in a self-centered escape from social responsibility. The Muslim mullahs (clerics) also ignored the social principles of the Qur'an, he charged, confining themselves to the duties and rites of the mosques, and treating non-Muslims with unkindly intolerance.

The Sikhs do not despise, nor despair of improving, this world. Nor do they despise the body; the mystery of creation and of life is within it; it has nobility, and they do not have to be ashamed of it. However, Nanak warned,

*This God-built house of the body,  
Of which the soul is a tenant, has many doors.  
The five temptations that flesh is the heir to  
Make daily raids upon it.*<sup>B5</sup>

The good person and the good Sikh is pure in motive and in act, prefers the virtuous, accepts others without regard to caste, craves the Guru's word an all divine knowledge as a creature craves food, loves one

spouse and renounces all others, avoids quarrelsome topics, is not arrogant, does not trample on others, and forsakes evil company, associating instead only with the holy.

Nanak's creed and practice were distinctly conciliatory and peaceful, and yet it was the singular fate of the religion he established to be obliged by persecution to change with the years into a vigorously self-defensive faith, its adherents resorting to the arbitrament of the sword. This is a fascinating story, to which we now turn.

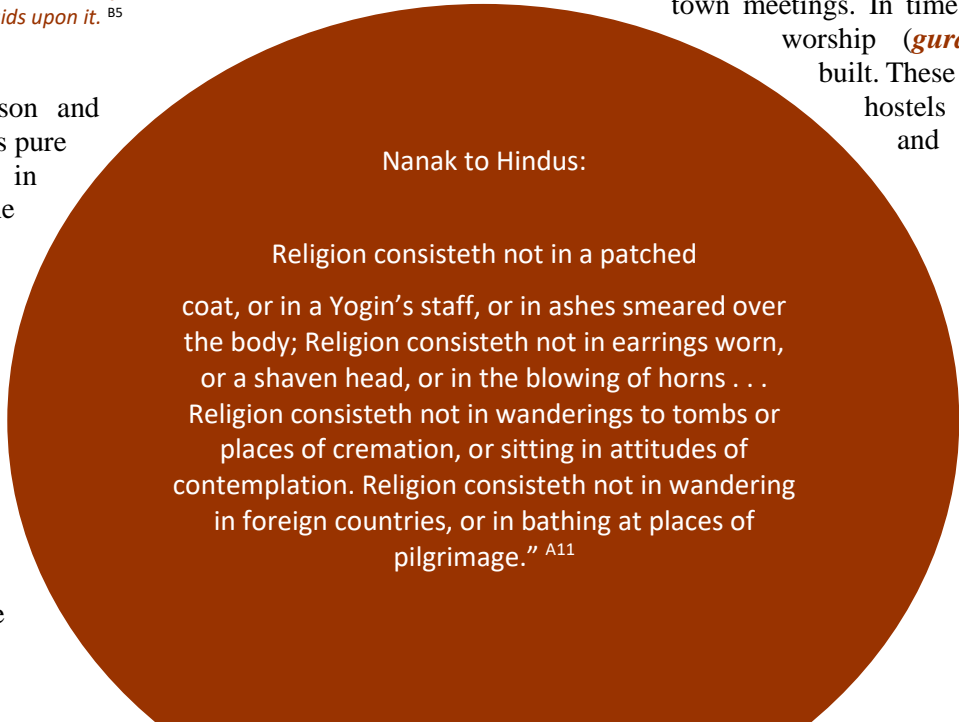
### III. THE POLITICAL HISTORY OF SIKHISM

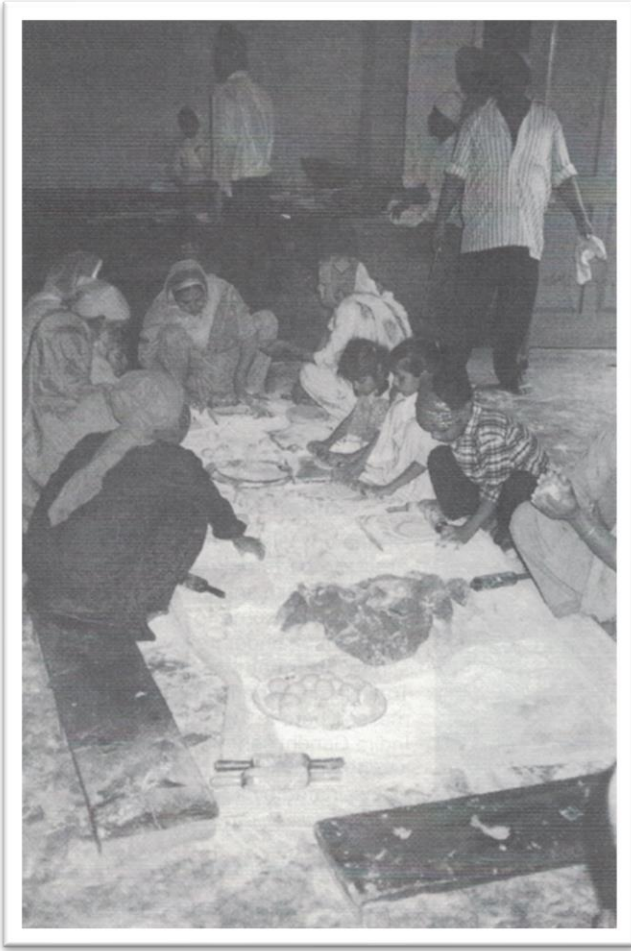
Nine **gurus**, as official heads of the Sikh religion, succeeded Nanak, and the body of believers grew.

Of the first four, Guru Amar Das (1552—1574) is typical. He was noted for his humility and freedom from pride of class, saying, "Let no one be proud of his caste. . . . The world is all made out of one clay."<sup>A12</sup> The nonviolence of early Sikh religion was evident in all he did. The Sikhs of his time lived by the rule: "If anyone ill-treat you, bear it three times, and God Himself will fight for you the fourth time."<sup>D</sup>

Several novel features of Sikh communal life were originated by Nanak and were continued through the years because they cemented both high and low together. Congregations (*sangats*) were set up, primarily for worship, but also with the function of town meetings. In time, buildings for worship (*gurdwaras*) were built. These often served as

hostels for transients and included community kitchens (langars) with free common meals. Social service, democracy, and harmony were thus promoted.





### Langar

*Sikhs in various countries designed their buildings for worship (gurdwaras). These included community kitchens and sometimes hostel facilities for transients. (Partly because they were free from caste and dietary restrictions Sikhs were drawn into occupations involving transience such as truck driving and military life.) After worship a free meal (langar) is offered as a social service. This Gurdwara is located in Delhi, India.*

But because the Sikhs were increasing rapidly and were being viewed by outsiders with suspicion, if not hostility, the Fifth Guru, Guru Arjan (1581—1606), began a transition to something more self-defensively militant. This was due to a changed attitude on the part of the Muslim authorities, and within Sikhism itself to the vigor and leadership of the handsome Arjan. In addition to completing the ambitious project of his predecessors—the artificial lake of Amritsar and the Har Mandir (Temple of God) on its island—Arjan did two things of lasting significance.

### The Adi Granth Compiled

First, Arjan compiled the *Adi Granth*, the Sikh Bible. Realizing that the devotional hymns used by the Sikhs in their worship were in danger of being lost, he brought them together into one collection. He was himself a talented poet, and half of the collection consisted of hymns of his own composition. The rest were mostly by Nanak, with a number by the second, third, and fourth gurus, and by Jaidev, Namdev, Kabir, and others. This compilation was at once recognized as notable by persons both within and outside the ranks of the Sikh following. The Muslim Emperor Akbar, of the Mughal dynasty, was told of it by his advisors, who considered it a dangerous infidel work, but Akbar was a tolerant monarch, and after hearing some readings from the *Granth* declared he discovered no dangerous ideas in it. He even paid Arjan a respectful visit and thus indicated his general approval. But the liberal-minded Akbar was succeeded by his more strictly Islamic son Jahangir, who, on the charge of political conspiracy, had Guru Arjan seized and tortured to death.

### A Militant Succession

Before he died, however, Arjan accomplished his second deed of lasting significance: he left the injunction to his son, Har Govind or Hargobind, to "sit fully armed on his throne, and maintain an army to the best of his ability."<sup>C2</sup>

Guru Har Govind (1606—1645) obeyed the last injunction of his father. At his installation he refused to wear, as being too suggestive of pacifism, the ordinary turban and necklace that had been passed down from his predecessors. His intention was clearly expressed: "My *seli* [necklace] shall be a swordbelt, and my turban shall be adorned with a royal aigrette."<sup>A13</sup> He lost no time in suiting his actions to his words. He surrounded himself with an armed bodyguard, built the first Sikh stronghold, and in due time drew thousands of Sikhs eager for military service. He was able to provide rations and clothing, as well as weapons, out of the monies in the treasury of the temple.

The Muslim world around him had been getting more and more hostile as the Sikhs, provided now with a



### The Golden Temple at Amritsar

*On the tiny island in the lake at Amritsar the temple housing the holy Granth, or Sikh scriptures, receives pilgrims who come to behold the sacred book under its jeweled canopy and to join in the worship of God, the True Name. When separatist militants massed here in 1984, Prime Minister Indira Gandhi sent troops onto the sacred premises. In retaliation she was assassinated by a Sikh body guard. (Courtesy of the United Nations. UNOP/.)*

capital city and a rich and beautiful temple, began to develop a national feeling. The Sikhs were no longer, from the Muslim point of view, an inconveniently close-knit yet otherwise harmless sect; they were a political and social reality that menaced the balance of power in northwest India. So the Muslims began to bestir themselves. And the Sikhs on their part found in themselves the qualities of fighting men.

Things did not go too well at first, however. Guru Har Govind fought and was imprisoned by the same Jahangir who had put his father to death, but when, soon after that, Jahangir died, the payment of a fine

released him – to fight again. Peaceful but wary consolidation of Sikh strength marked the rule of the next three gurus, the last of whom was imprisoned and executed by the Emperor Aurangzeb.

### Govind Singh, "The Lion"

The unequal struggle broke out in renewed military conflict in the time of the Tenth Guru, **Govind Singh** (1675-1708). On his accession this guru was called Govind Rai, but he is better known as Govind Singh, Govind the Lion. He found the Sikhs

Nanak to Muslims:

“Let compassion be thy mosque, Let faith be thy prayer mat, Let honest living be thy Koran, Let modesty be the rules of observance, Let piety be the fasts thou keepest; In such wise strive to be a Muslim; Right conduct the Ka'ba; Truth the Prophet, Good deeds thy prayer; Submission to the Lord's Will thy rosary; Nanak, if this thou do. the Lord will be thy Protector.”<sup>B4</sup>

aroused for a major struggle. They were, he declared, not animated by enmity to any person but only fearlessly resolved to declare and defend the Truth. Only if they had to would they seek a separate Sikh state. He hoped the Muslims would not force the issue. Meanwhile, he exhorted the Sikhs to stand firm in their faith. While he awaited a possible clash of arms, he fortified the spirits of his followers by writing hymns, after the manner of the first gurus, but at times in a very martial style. God was reinterpreted to bring out his character of a militant Lord of Hosts in time of peril. For example,

*I bow to Him who holdeth the arrow in His hand; I bow to the Fearless One;  
I bow to the God of gods who is in the present and the future.*

*I bow to the Scimitar, the two-edged Sword, the Falchion, and the Dagger  
I bow to the Holder of the Mace . . .  
I bow to the Arrow and the Cannon. . . .<sup>c3</sup>*

These words are prefaced with the startling invocation,

*Hail, hail to the Creator of the world, the Savior of creation, my Cherisher, hail to Thee, O Sword!*

Divine ascriptions from the language of weaponry are explained as follows by a contemporary Sikh:

The Guru regarded weapons as objects of great sanctity and inculcated the idea of their worship. He even deified them and identified them with God himself. Hence the use of such names of God as *Sarbloh* (All Steel), *Kharagket* (Emblem of the Sword), and *Bhagauti* (Sword).<sup>E</sup>

These and his other less militant hymns were later compiled into the **Dasam Granth**, also known as *The Granth of the Tenth Guru*, and made an authoritative supplement to the First (or Adi) Granth. Among

them is the following moving proclamation of human brotherhood:

*One man by shaving his head  
Hopes to become a holy monk  
Another sets up as a Yogin  
Or some other kind of ascetic.  
Some call themselves Hindus;  
Others call themselves Muslims . . .  
And yet man is of one race in all the world . . .  
Worship the One God,  
For all men the One Divine Teacher.  
All men have the same form,  
All men have the same soul.<sup>B6</sup>*

Of himself and his mission he sang,

*For this mission God sent me into the world,  
And on the earth I was born as a mortal  
As he spoke to me, I must speak unto men:  
Fearlessly I will declare His Truth,  
But without enmity to any man.  
Those who call me God  
Shall fall into the depths of Hell.  
Greet me as God's servant only.<sup>B7</sup>*

## **Khalsa, the Order of Singhs**

There can be no question about the fact that Govind Singh was thoroughly convinced of his divine authority. After months of brooding, the inspiration came to him to institute his greatest innovation, the **Khalsa** ("the Pure"), through the Khanda di-Pahul or Baptism of the Sword, he felt it was of God.

One day, after testing the sincerity of five followers, three of whom were from the so-called lower castes, by giving them an opportunity to prove they were willing to die for the faith, he poured water into an iron basin and stirred it with a double-edged sword, meanwhile mixing in Indian sweets to produce nectar (*amrit*). He then bade each to drink five palmfuls of the sweetened water (important as a sign of the extinction of caste) and then sprinkled the water five times on each man's hair and into his eyes. Thus baptized into a new order of life, they were made to repeat what became the war cry of the Sikhs, *Waheguru ji ka*

*Khalsa, Waheguru ji ki Fateh*—"The Pure are of God, and the victory is to God."

They were charged to wear ever after the five K's: (1) the *Kesh*, or long uncut hair on head and chin, (2) the *Kangha*, or comb, (3) the *Kachh*, or short drawers, (4) the *Kara*, or steel bracelet, and (5) the *Kirpan*, or sword. Beyond this, they pledged themselves to worship the one invisible God, to revere the one visible holy object, the Granth, to honor the gurus, to rise before dawn to bathe in cold water, and then to meditate and pray. They gave up all stimulants, especially alcoholic liquors, and eschewed tobacco. They were encouraged to begin the eating of meat, provided it was from an animal slain in the prescribed manner, that is, by a single stroke of the sword. All who were thus initiated and committed to the Khalsa could bear the name Singh or Lion. (Today, girls as well as boys are initiated into the ceremonies of the five K's at puberty; the corresponding name for girls is Kaur, or "princess.")

Guru Govind himself became a Singh, by obliging the first five neophytes, after he had initiated them, to baptize him in turn. Then he threw the new cult open to men of every class, regardless of caste. To the open distress of the higher castes, many individuals from the lower classes, and even pariahs, flocked to join the guru's organization; thrilled by the baptism of the sword, they were transformed from shrinking untouchables and timid low-caste men into free and fearless soldiers, equal to the best. Clean living and an all-round diet gave them strong physiques; the enthusiasm of a confident faith gave them courage in battle; dedicated and independent leaders gave them direction.

### Transition: The Granth as Guru

Not all Sikhs became Singhs. Some remained **Nanak-panthis** ("Followers of Nanak"), displaying varying shades of pacifism and remaining dubious of war making.

Although Govind Singh was successful in fighting off nearby hostile hill chieftains, his struggles with the resourceful Muslim ruler Aurangzeb were without

advantage to the Sikhs. The guru lost his four sons on whom his hopes of succession depended, two in battle and two by execution, and the Sikh army was routed. After the doughty Mughal emperor died, Govind Singh was on friendly terms with his successor, Bahadur Shah, only to be himself the next to fall—by the knife of a Muslim assassin in 1708. He had provided, however, for such an event, and told his Sikhs, disappointed as he was in his hopes of succession, that after his death they were to regard the Granth as their guru; there was no need of other leadership than the teaching of the holy book.

The Sikhs were obedient. Except for a dissident few, they have had no human guru since then; instead, they have revered the Granth as their one divine authority. At the Golden Temple in Amritsar, it daily receives the honors of royalty. "Every morning it is dressed out in costly brocade, and reverently placed on a low throne under a jewelled canopy. Every evening it is made to repose for the night in a golden bed within a sacred chamber, railed off and protected from all profane intrusion by bolts and bars."<sup>F</sup> But though its words, as read from a duplicate copy, resound daily in the temple, it is written in so many languages and archaic dialects that, except for their scholars, the people must learn the meaning from popular expositions and translations into the vernacular.

The political history of Sikhism since Govind Singh's day has been one of great military renown. The Sikhs won many battles, and in due time dominated the whole Punjab. When the British came to subdue them in 1845 and 1848, they put up an exciting struggle. In 1849, the last Sikh ruler, Maharajah Dhulip Singh, surrendered to the victorious British army, and as a pledge of loyalty gave over to Queen Victoria the world-renowned Koh-i-noor diamond. After that, the Sikhs responded to the respect their conquerors felt for them, and never went back on their word to them. When the so-called Indian Mutiny broke out, the Singhs of the Khalsa, remembering the oppressions of the Muslims, rushed to the British colors and helped save India for the British crown. The crown rewarded them with trust. All over the East they were the favorite soldiery and constabulary of the British colonial power.

They could be seen in Hong Kong and Shanghai as well as in the nearer areas of Singapore and Burma.

### Continuing Political Unrest

Political unrest was destined to continue within the Sikh community and also between their community and succeeding central governments. Above all, they mourned the fact that their "slavery" under the British Raj had brought to an end all hope of developing in independence the form of democracy instituted by their gurus, in which the whole people, as represented in the *Panth*, or General Assembly, were the real sovereign in temporal matters, each Sikh being the equal of any other. (Women also have been granted considerable freedom. Sikh religious convocations are thrown open to them, and they are allowed to engage freely in religious and social observances.) The Granth (and not any one official, however high in authority) is the ultimate and absolute spiritual ruler.

But when the British left the Indian subcontinent, its division into India and Pakistan in 1947 brought tragedy to the Sikhs. Half of them found themselves in Pakistan, and violent riots broke out between them and the Muslim majority. Some Sikhs, indeed, reverted to the role of Lions of the Punjab. It is estimated that 2,500,000 Sikhs had to leave Pakistan for India in exchange for the Muslims who left India. In place of the farms they left in Pakistan, the rural Sikhs had to accept much smaller homesteads in India. The economic consequences were often severe, as were the emotional consequences. The displaced Sikhs had to reconcile themselves to the loss of the holy places left behind in Pakistan, including the birthplace of Nanak.

The vast majority of Sikhs are now within the boundaries of India. An ample majority are political moderates, and one of their number, Zail Singh, was elected president of India in 1982 and served until 1987. But their political status is not what they wish it to be. Some Sikhs demand complete political independence;

a Khalsa Dal ("Society of the Pure") organization campaigns hard for a separate Sikh state. Others oppose this, believing that Sikhism has a role to play in the development of Indian democracy. But even moderate Sikhs, who control the government of the state of Punjab, are stirred to vigorous protests over such sensitive questions as the diversion of Ganges water from the Punjab to neighboring, predominantly Hindu, states.

Sikhs have been annoyed by the assumption on the part of many Hindus that Sikhism is subsumed within Hinduism as a "militant branch." There are protests when copies of the Guru Granth Sahib are given a place in a Hindu temple. (The Indian constitution as originally drafted did not list Sikhism as a recognized religion. As late as 2005 efforts at amendment were not successful.)

For more than a decade, terrorist activity by militant Khalsa Dal separatists continued, bombings and shootings occurring almost weekly. The Indian government responded in 1982 by arresting three hundred separatist leaders and in 1984 by raiding the Khalsa Dal base in the shore portion of the premises of the Golden Temple at Amritsar. Sikh militants retaliated, assassinating Prime Minister Indira Gandhi in 1984 and the leader of Rajiv Gandhi's Congress I Party in 1987. It is noteworthy that in sentencing the three assassins of Indira Gandhi the Delhi High Court took the unusual step of recognizing that the crime had been motivated by "the highest and noblest impulses—loyalty to one's religion."

Khalsa Dal violence escalated in 1991, resulting in nearly five thousand deaths and forcing the cancellation of elections in the Punjab. Rescheduled balloting in 1992 showed a majority for the moderate Congress Party, but the turnout of voters was the lowest in history because of Sikh extremist intimidation. Sporadic terrorist attacks continued into 1997. One assassination in particular, that of Punjab Minister Beant Singh in 1995, shook the government's confidence that violence would diminish.

## GLOSSARY

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- Adi Granth** primary collection of Sikh scripture (mostly hymns) assembled by the Fifth Guru: Guru Arjan ( 1581-1606)
- Dasam Granth** or *The Granth of the Tenth Guru*, Govind Singh's compilation of his own writings ( 1698 C.E.), lost and later reassembled in several versions
- Govind Singh** (1675—1708) Tenth (and last) Guru in the Sikh succession, compiler of the *Dasam Granth* and founder of the Khalsa order
- gurdwara** a building for worship and hospitality, usually including a room for the Granth, hostel accommodations, and a community kitchen (*langar*)
- guru** "heavy," in general usage a venerated teacher; in Sikhism one of a line of ten designated spiritual leaders, ending with Govind Singh
- haumai** egoism, self-centeredness, which (along with *maya*) threatens to ensnare human beings, separating them from the True Name
- Japji** a prayer attributed to Nanak, used in daily devotional rites
- Kabir** (1440-1518) poet follower of the Hindu reformer Ramananda, a monotheist precursor of Nanak in elevating inward sincerity over rituals, ascetic practices, pilgrimages, and so on
- Khalsa** "the Pure," core concept behind the pledges and lifestyle commitments of the militant Singh order, the "Order of the Lion," first established by Govind Singh
- maya** in Sikhism, not pure illusion (as in Hinduism) but the limited reality of this world, apt through *haumai* (self-centeredness) to be a snare to those who do not perceive it as a revelation of the True Name, the ultimate Reality
- Nam-Marg** "the Path of the Name," Sikh self-reference to distinguish it from Hindu paths: "Bhakti Marga," and so on
- Nanak** (1469-1538) founder of the religious community known as the Sikhs ("disciples")
- Nanak-panthis** followers of Nanak who prefer not to commit themselves to the militant rules of the Khalsa
- sangat** a congregation for worship and for setting Sikh community policy

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