

Ethical and Environmental Values in Sikhism and their Relevance in the Post-Modern Era

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ABSTRACT

The term *Sikh* is derived from the Sanskrit word *Sishya*, meaning “disciple” or “learner.” Sikhism, therefore, is fundamentally a path of learning and spiritual discipline, centered on devotion to God (*Ik Onkar*-One Supreme Reality) and moral living in the world. Unlike ascetic traditions that emphasize withdrawal from worldly life, Sikhism advocates active participation in society while maintaining spiritual awareness. It rejects ritualism, superstition, caste discrimination, gender inequality, and blind faith, stressing instead inner devotion, ethical conduct, and social responsibility. Sikhism is one of the world’s youngest yet most profound religious traditions, originating in the Indian subcontinent during the late fifteenth century. It emerged in a period of intense religious, social, and political transformation marked by the interaction of Hindu and Islamic traditions, the decline of established social hierarchies, and widespread spiritual unrest. Sikhism emerged in a socio-religious environment marked by ritualism, caste oppression, religious intolerance, and political instability. Sikhism offered a transformative spiritual vision based on devotion to one God, equality of all human beings, moral living, and active participation in society. Rather than promoting renunciation or ascetic withdrawal, Sikhism emphasizes living a righteous life while fulfilling social responsibilities. The teachings of Sikhism are preserved primarily in the Guru Granth Sahib, the sacred scripture and eternal Guru of the Sikhs. These teachings address spiritual, ethical, social, and political dimensions of life, making Sikhism not only a religion but a comprehensive way of life. Sikhism is a holistic religious tradition that integrates spirituality with ethical conduct, social responsibility, and respect for life. Founded in the late fifteenth century by Guru Nanak Dev Ji, Sikhism emerged as a response to ritualism, caste discrimination, religious intolerance, and social injustice prevalent in medieval India. Unlike purely metaphysical systems, Sikhism places ethical action at the very heart of religious life. Its teachings are deeply concerned with how human beings live, relate to one another, treat nature, and respect life in all its forms. The ethical, environmental, and bioethical principles of Sikhism are primarily derived from the Guru Granth Sahib, the teachings of the ten Sikh Gurus, and the lived practices of the Sikh community. Sikh ethics are not abstract moral codes but practical guidelines for righteous living (*dharam*) rooted in devotion to one God (*Ik Onkar*).

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KEYWORDS: *Sikhism, God, Guru, Ethics, Human, Holistic.*

INTRODUCTION

The term *Sikh* is derived from the Sanskrit word *Sishya*, meaning “disciple” or “learner.” Sikhism, therefore, is fundamentally a path of learning and

spiritual discipline, centered on devotion to God (*Ik Onkar*-One Supreme Reality) and moral living in the world (Nesbitt., 2016). Unlike ascetic traditions that

emphasize withdrawal from worldly life, Sikhism advocates active participation in society while maintaining spiritual awareness. It rejects ritualism, superstition, caste discrimination, gender inequality, and blind faith, stressing instead inner devotion, ethical conduct, and social responsibility (Macauliffe., 1909). Sikhism is one of the world's youngest yet most profound religious traditions, originating in the Indian subcontinent during the late fifteenth century. It emerged in a period of intense religious, social, and political transformation marked by the interaction of Hindu and Islamic traditions, the decline of established social hierarchies, and widespread spiritual unrest. Sikhism developed as a distinct religious system with its own theology, philosophy, ethics, scriptures, rituals, and institutions. At its core, Sikhism emphasizes the oneness of God, the unity of humanity, the pursuit of truthful living, social justice, equality, and selfless service (Singh., 2011). Today, Sikhism is followed by over twenty-five million people worldwide, making it the fifth-largest organized religion globally, with adherents spread across India and the global diaspora. Sikhism arose in the Punjab region of South Asia, a fertile land historically known for its cultural diversity, trade routes, and religious pluralism (Sandhu., 2023). According to Sikh tradition, Guru Nanak experienced a profound spiritual revelation, after which he declared:

“There is no Hindu, there is no Muslim” a statement emphasizing the essential unity of humanity beyond religious labels. Sikhism remains highly relevant today due to its emphasis on interfaith harmony, environmental responsibility, gender equality, and social justice. Its teachings offer meaningful responses to contemporary ethical, ecological, and spiritual crises (Kumar., 2025).

Main teachings of Sikhism: - Sikhism is a monotheistic and ethical religion that originated in the Punjab region of the Indian subcontinent during the late fifteenth century. Founded by Guru Nanak Dev Ji (1469–1539), Sikhism emerged in a socio-religious environment marked by ritualism, caste oppression, religious intolerance, and political instability. Sikhism offered a transformative spiritual vision based on devotion to one God, equality of all human beings, moral living, and active participation in society. Rather than promoting renunciation or ascetic withdrawal, Sikhism emphasizes living a righteous life while fulfilling social responsibilities. The teachings of Sikhism are preserved primarily in the Guru Granth Sahib, the sacred scripture and eternal Guru of the Sikhs. These teachings address spiritual, ethical, social, and political dimensions of life, making Sikhism not only a religion but a

comprehensive way of life. The core message of Sikhism revolves around the realization of God through devotion, truthful living, selfless service, and social justice (Gyani., 1938).

The Principal Ethical, Environmental, and Bioethical Principles of Sikhism: - Sikhism is a holistic religious tradition that integrates spirituality with ethical conduct, social responsibility, and respect for life. Founded in the late fifteenth century by Guru Nanak Dev Ji, Sikhism emerged as a response to ritualism, caste discrimination, religious intolerance, and social injustice prevalent in medieval India. Unlike purely metaphysical systems, Sikhism places ethical action at the very heart of religious life. Its teachings are deeply concerned with how human beings live, relate to one another, treat nature, and respect life in all its forms. The ethical, environmental, and bioethical principles of Sikhism are primarily derived from the Guru Granth Sahib, the teachings of the ten Sikh Gurus, and the lived practices of the Sikh community. Sikh ethics are not abstract moral codes but practical guidelines for righteous living (*dharam*) rooted in devotion to one God (*Ik Onkar*). Sikhism envisions a moral order where spiritual realization is inseparable from social justice, environmental stewardship, and compassion for all living beings (Singh., 2026). In the contemporary world marked by ecological degradation, bioethical dilemmas, technological interventions in life processes, and moral uncertainty Sikh ethical teachings offer a coherent and relevant framework grounded in equality, responsibility, and reverence for life.

I. Ethical Principles of Sikhism

- 1. Ethical Monotheism and Moral Accountability:** - At the foundation of Sikh ethics lies ethical monotheism the belief in one universal, formless God who is both the creator and moral governor of the universe. God in Sikhism is described as just, compassionate, and truthful. Since God dwells within all creation, ethical behaviour becomes a form of devotion. Human beings are morally accountable for their actions (*karma*), not through fear of punishment but through awareness of divine presence. Ethical conduct is therefore intrinsic to spiritual progress.
- 2. Truth (Sat) as the Supreme Ethical Value:** - Truth (*Sat*) occupies the highest ethical position in Sikhism. The Guru Granth Sahib declares, “*Truth is high, but higher still is truthful living.*” Truth is not merely factual correctness but a way of life aligned with divine will (*Hukam*).
- 3. Equality and Human Dignity:** - One of the most revolutionary ethical principles of Sikhism is

absolute equality of all human beings. Sikhism categorically rejects caste hierarchy, untouchability, gender discrimination, racial superiority, and religious exclusivism.

4. **Justice (Nyaya) and Resistance to Oppression:** - Justice is central to Sikh moral thought. Sikhism teaches that silence in the face of injustice is unethical. Ethical life demands resistance to tyranny and defense of the oppressed.
5. **Seva (Selfless Service):** - Seva, or selfless service, is a cornerstone of Sikh ethics. Serving humanity without expectation of reward is considered service to God.
6. **Control of Ego (Haumai):** - Sikh ethics identify ego as the root cause of moral corruption. Ego manifests as greed, lust, anger, pride, and attachment. Ethical purification involves: - Humility, Detachment from excessive desires, Compassion for others and Awareness of divine presence. The ethical ideal is not self-denial but ego-transformation.
7. **Honest Labor and Economic Ethics:** - Sikhism strongly emphasizes Kirat Karni earning a livelihood through honest means. Exploitation, corruption, hoarding, and unethical profit-making are condemned. Ethical economic principles include: Fair wages, Sharing wealth (*Vand Chakna*), Social responsibility of wealth and Opposition to exploitation. Economic ethics are inseparable from spirituality.

II. Environmental Ethics in Sikhism

1. **Nature as Divine Creation:** - Sikhism views nature as a sacred manifestation of divine creativity. The Guru Granth Sahib reveres air, water, and earth as life-sustaining forces. Nature is not an object for domination but a partner in existence.
2. **Interconnectedness of Life:** - Sikh teachings emphasize the interdependence of all life forms. Humans are part of nature, not separate from it. Environmental ethics include: Respect for biodiversity, Recognition of ecological balance and Responsibility toward future generations. Environmental destruction is viewed as a moral failure.
3. **Air, Water, and Earth Ethics:** - The Guru Granth Sahib states: - Air as the vital force, Water as life-giver and Earth as the nurturing mother. Pollution and environmental degradation are thus ethical violations.
4. **Simplicity and Sustainable Living:** - Sikhism encourages moderation and simplicity.

Overconsumption, waste, and material excess are seen as expressions of ego. Environmental responsibility includes: Minimalism, Sharing resources, Sustainable consumption and Ethical use of technology.

5. **Community-Based Environmental Responsibility:** - The Sikh concept of Sarbat da Bhala (welfare of all) extends to ecological welfare. Environmental protection is a collective ethical responsibility. Sikh institutions increasingly engage in: Tree plantation, clean water initiatives, Renewable energy use in Gurdwaras and Environmental education

III. Bioethical Principles of Sikhism

1. **Sanctity of Life:** - Sikhism affirms the sacredness of all life, grounded in the belief that divine light resides in every being. Human life is precious, but not superior in a way that justifies cruelty toward other life forms.
2. **Compassion (Daya) as Bioethical Foundation:** - Compassion is central to Sikh bioethics. Ethical decisions related to life, health, and suffering must be guided by empathy and care. This principal influences attitudes toward: - Medical treatment, End-of-life care, Disability and Mental health
3. **Health, Illness, and Medical Care:** - Sikhism does not oppose medical science. Illness is not seen as divine punishment but as part of human existence. Bioethical guidelines include: Seeking medical treatment, Balancing faith with reason, Caring for the sick as moral duty and Rejecting superstition in healthcare
4. **Organ Donation and Blood Donation:** - Sikh ethics strongly support organ and blood donation as acts of Seva. Saving life is a supreme moral act. There are no theological prohibitions against donation; instead, it is encouraged as compassion in action.
5. **Reproductive Ethics:** - Sikhism promotes responsible parenthood, dignity of women, and moral responsibility in reproduction. Bioethical positions include: Rejection of female infanticide, Respect for women's bodily dignity, Ethical family planning and Opposition to exploitation through reproductive technologies
6. **Euthanasia and End-of-Life Ethics:** - Sikh bioethics emphasizes acceptance of divine will (*Hukam*) while prioritizing compassion. While active euthanasia is generally discouraged, Sikh ethics support: Palliative care, Relief from

suffering, Dignity in dying and Emotional and spiritual support

7. **Genetic Engineering and Biotechnology:** - Sikhism does not reject scientific advancement but calls for ethical restraint. Biotechnology must respect: Human dignity, Natural balance, social justice and Avoidance of exploitation. Scientific progress must serve humanity, not commercial greed.
8. **Animal Ethics:** - While Sikhism does not mandate vegetarianism, it condemns cruelty toward animals. Ethical considerations include: Humane treatment, Avoidance of unnecessary killing, Environmental sustainability and Ethical food practices.

IV. Contemporary Relevance of Sikh Ethical Thought: - In a world facing climate crisis, bioethical dilemmas, inequality, and technological overreach, Sikh ethics provide: A balance between spirituality and science, A framework for ecological responsibility, A compassionate approach to life and death and A justice-oriented moral vision. Sikh ethical principles promote global harmony, interfaith respect, and sustainable development.

Postmodern Trends in Sikhism and the Relevance of Sikhism in the Post-Modern Era:- Religion in the postmodern era often shifts from rigid institutional frameworks to flexible, interpretive, and experiential forms. Faith traditions are re-examined, deconstructed, and re-contextualized. Sikhism, with its non-dogmatic ethos and emphasis on internal devotion (*Naam Simran*) and ethical living, is particularly well suited to this environment. Postmodernity represents a historical, cultural, and intellectual condition marked by skepticism toward grand narratives, rejection of absolute truths, pluralism of identities, rapid technological change, globalization, and ethical uncertainty. Traditional religious systems have been significantly challenged in this era by secularism, consumerism, scientific rationalism, and cultural relativism. Yet, many religions have not merely survived postmodernity but have reinterpreted themselves in creative and meaningful ways. Sikhism, though founded in the fifteenth century, has shown remarkable adaptability and relevance in the postmodern context. Sikhism, rooted in devotion to one universal God (*Ik Onkar*), ethical living, equality, and social justice, possesses an inherently dynamic and reformative character. Its emphasis on lived spirituality rather than dogma, inclusivity rather than exclusivism, and ethical action

rather than ritualism aligns strongly with postmodern sensibilities. In the postmodern era, Sikhism has undergone reinterpretations in theology, identity, community life, technology, gender discourse, environmental ethics, and global engagement. At the same time, its core principles continue to offer powerful responses to postmodern challenges such as identity crisis, moral relativism, ecological degradation, and social fragmentation. Postmodernity is characterized by: Distrust of universal truth claims, Fragmentation of identity, Cultural pluralism, Decline of institutional authority, Rise of individual spirituality, Technological mediation of life and Global interconnectedness.

Conclusion: - Sikhism in the postmodern era demonstrates a remarkable capacity for reinterpretation without abandoning its foundational values. Its emphasis on lived ethics, spiritual humility, equality, service, and justice aligns powerfully with postmodern concerns while offering a corrective to its excess's moral relativism, alienation, and ecological neglect. The ethical, environmental, and bioethical principles of Sikhism form an integrated moral vision grounded in devotion to one God, respect for life, and responsibility toward humanity and nature. Sikhism teaches that spirituality without ethics is empty, and ethics without compassion is incomplete. Rather than resisting postmodernity, Sikhism engages it critically, offering a vision of spirituality that is inclusive without being vague, ethical without being authoritarian, and traditional without being rigid. In an age marked by fragmentation, Sikhism provides a unifying moral and spiritual framework rooted in compassion, responsibility, and universal human dignity. Sikhism's enduring relevance lies in its ability to harmonize faith and reason, individuality and community, spirituality and justice-making it not only a religion of the past but a vital guide for the postmodern future.

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