

Teaching about Sikhism

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Sikhism is one of the world’s major religions. There are approximately 27 million Sikhs worldwide, 76% of whom live in Punjab, a region of northern India that is divided between India and Pakistan. Eighty-three percent of all Sikhs live in India itself. Some of the largest Sikh populations outside the Indian subcontinent reside in the United Kingdom and Canada, where there are an estimated 500,000 Sikhs in each country. The World Religion Database at Boston University estimates there are about 280,000 Sikhs in the United States. Large Sikh populations can also be found in Malaysia and East Africa, and Sikh communities are growing in Australia, Thailand, and Italy.

Religion and religious identity are not monolithic, and the American Academy of Religion states that all religions are, “internally diverse, culturally embedded, and change over time.”¹ For this lesson, we have adopted the 3B framework described in Chapter 1 of this book to help students learn how religious identity is formed and understood. Each of the three components—belief, behavior, and belonging—informs the other two in varying degrees across communities of the same religion. Students should understand that individuals and communities value these religious components differently.

To teach Sikhism through the 3B framework, we recommend a lesson that focuses on the introductory section below, followed by a set of comprehension questions and possible answers on which students can be assessed. The lesson is aimed at high school students between the 10th and 12th grades, but can be adapted for earlier grades.

INTRODUCTION TO SIKHISM²

WHAT IS SIKHISM?

Sikhism is a word used to refer to the religious tradition of the Sikhs, an estimated 27 million people worldwide. Sikhs however identify more with the concept of *dharam* (*dharam* means the righteous path of living and is associated with the classical Sanskrit noun *dharma* from the ancient, classical language of India). The word holds

multiple meanings in various Indic traditions, but for Sikhs it refers to a sense of duty or living in the right way. The Sikh religious tradition is therefore often described as the “Sikh *dharam*.” (The glossary on page 152 includes this and other definitions.)

The word “Sikh” means learner and “Guru” means teacher. The word Sikh originates from *shishya* in Sanskrit, meaning “disciple.” In modern Punjabi (the language most associated with Sikhs, whose tradition emerged in northern India), *sikhna* means “to learn” and *sikhya* means “teaching” or “something which is learnt.” Sikhs therefore also refer to their tradition as “Sikhi” or the “path of learning.”

The word Guru holds great significance for Sikhs. Sikhs are guided in their learning by the Guru’s wisdom or understanding, and aspire to live by the Guru’s teachings. A popular understanding of the word Guru is one through whom spiritual darkness (*gu*) is dispelled by spiritual light (*ru*), an enlightener.

For Sikhs, the word “Guru” refers to Guru Nanak, the founder of the Sikh *dharam* and his nine human successors. The word “Guru” is also the title given to the Guru Granth Sahib, the volume of sacred scripture that is respected as the eternal guiding voice and living spirit of the Gurus, and which is literally revered as the body and physical presence of the human Gurus themselves. Sikhs believe that

through its teachings, the Guru Granth Sahib has the ability to transform and enlighten them.

Thirdly there is also the notion of “Guru Panth”—the Guru dwelling in the body of disciples dedicated to the Guru’s path. This means that because the spirit of the Guru is also present within the community of practicing Sikhs, collectively they can come to decisions concerning matters affecting their community with guidance and authority. Another use of the word Guru is when it occurs in scripture. In this sense it is often interpreted to mean the Eternal, Formless Guru, understood as God.

THE GENESIS OF THE SIKH DHARAM IN PUNJAB

The Punjab lies in the north-west of India, divided between present-day India and Pakistan. The Sikh dharam has had a close relationship with the land and culture of Punjab, since it was the birthplace of Guru Nanak, its founding Guru, and was the base for some of the subsequent Gurus.

Punjab has been a home to Vedic culture and modern day Hinduism since 2000 BCE. As Punjab was a “gateway” over land from the west into India, it also gave rise to many invasions and Muslim settlers. The earliest Muslim settlers were Arabs, who came in the 7th century CE. In 1526, Babur, a Muslim descendant of the Mongol Genghis Khan, invaded India and founded the Mughal empire. The rise and fall of the Mughal dynasty ran almost in parallel with the duration of the ten Sikh Guruships. Islamic thought, culture, and governance came to pervade daily life as the Hindu majority was ruled by Muslims, and a number of Hindus converted to Islam. The Mughal Emperor Akbar who reigned from 1556-1605, showed an openness to India’s broad religious traditions, and it was under his rule that the Sikh community took shape under the early Sikh Gurus. However, Akbar’s successors, Emperors Jehangir (1605-1627) and Aurangzeb (1658-1707), introduced an era of great oppression against Sikhs.



The Punjab, divided between India and Pakistan.

GURU NANAK

Guru Nanak was born in 1469 in present-day Pakistan, into a Hindu family in the town of Nankana Sahib. He worked in Sultanpur in his late twenties, and tradition recounts how, when he was bathing in the river Bein, he disappeared for three days, was mystically transported to God's presence, and there sipped the nectar of Naam—God's Name. Through this he received a revelation of the Truth and became conscious of a mission to awaken others. When he emerged from the river, he described God in the following words, which became the central message for Sikh belief and teachings and the opening verse of the Guru Granth Sahib:

*God is One — all is His creation,
Eternal Truth by Name,
the Supreme Creator,
free from fear, free from vengeance,
image of the Timeless Being,
beyond the cycle of births and deaths,
realized through the Guru's divine grace.
Thus meditate on Him (God).
God was True before the dawn of time,
true throughout the ages.
True now,
and says Nanak, forever True.*

Guru Nanak's message was a call against "falsehood" and the "famine of truth." His verses reflected the political and social circumstances of the Punjab during his time. They spoke out against the lack of compassion he witnessed during the brutal invasion of Emperor Babur (who reigned from 1526-1530); they spoke out against women being treated as inferior to men and urged that women be cherished as divine equals; they spoke out against the elite

priestly classes and the caste system, stating that God could be reached by anyone; and they spoke out against empty rituals which promised to bring people closer to God.

Guru Nanak also proclaimed that "there is no Hindu; there is no Muslim," suggesting that he was living in a time of insincerity and hypocrisy when people were not being "true" to their faith. Without inner substance, outward identity or labels were meaningless. Sikhs believe that in God's eyes, it is not one's label, but what one has made of life, spiritually and morally, that counts.

Guru Nanak set off on four long journeys to encourage people to walk the path of Truth. In a period of over twenty-four years, he went Eastwards, visiting cities sacred to the Hindus such as Hardwar, Ayodhya, Benares, and Bihar. He then went Southwards to Sri Lanka, returning via Gujarat and Rajasthan, and later journeyed Northwards into the Himalayas as far as Tibet. He then went Westwards towards the Middle East, to Mecca and Medina, the sacred cities of Islam, returning through Iran, Iraq, Uzbekistan, and Afghanistan.

There are many historical accounts associated with these journeys, which Guru Nanak made with his childhood friends, a Muslim musician named Bhai Mardana and a Hindu named Bhai Bala. With each interaction there was a call for integrity and truth, by teaching through practical example, with humility and a love for humanity.

After his years of traveling, Guru Nanak returned to settle in the Punjab with his family in Kartarpur (literally meaning the town of God, the Creator). Guru Nanak discarded the robes of a wandering holy man and put on those of an everyday householder, establishing that spirituality should be cultivated in everyday life. Kartarpur became a *dharamsaal*—a place from where to learn and practice *dharam*, or righteous living. Guru Nanak's threefold motto was *Naam japo, kirat karo, wand ke chakko*—remember God through prayer and repeat God's Name (Naam), work honestly, and share with others. These were the building blocks for Sikh life and the beginnings of a Sikh community.

Guru Nanak's life teachings had attracted both Hindu and Muslim followers. It is a Sikh belief that, when Guru Nanak departed from the world in 1539, Hindus and Muslims wanted to conduct a funeral according to their respective customs. In the end they found only flowers under the shroud covering the body and divided the shroud in two. The Hindus cremated their half of the shroud, and the Muslims buried the other half. Both memorial sites are in close proximity to one another in Kartarpur, a short distance from what has become the border that divides India from Pakistan.

The attitude of Sikhs towards others stems from the teaching of Ik Oankar (the message that there is only One God the Creator). Sikhs believe that every human being, regardless of which path they follow, must be treated equally because God is present within them. Many paths have been created by God to reach Him and they must all be respected as equally valid. Sikhs do not actively proselytize but remember the sentiment behind Guru Nanak's teachings to Hindus and Muslims: if you are a Hindu be a good Hindu; if you are a Muslim be a good Muslim. If people practice their religion truthfully and with integrity, the outward label is not significant.

The philosophy behind the attitudes of Sikhs to other faiths is further illustrated in teachings from subsequent Gurus. The foundation stone of the Harmandir Sahib (the Golden Temple) in Amritsar, was laid by a Muslim Saint at the invitation of the fifth Guru (Guru Arjan). It was also designed with four entrances, indicating that Sikhs welcome people from all walks of life. The tradition of Langar—free vegetarian food distributed from all Gurudwaras (Sikh places of worship)—is one of serving all people without discrimination. A verse by Guru Gobind Singh teaches the need for Sikhs to “recognize the entire human race as one large family.” As such, Sikhs find that they have a strong foundation for understanding and respecting other traditions.

Glossary of Sikh Terms

Amrit: holy water (lit. nectar of immortality).

Bhai: Used as a term of respect (lit. brother).

Chaur sahib: A fan waved over the Guru Granth Sahib to signify eminence and respect.

Dastaar: turban.

Dharam: righteous path of living.

Dharamsaal: place of worship.

Gurmukhi: the name of the script in which the Guru Granth Sahib is written (literally, from the mouth of the Guru).

Guru: an enlightened teacher. The term can refer to the ten human Gurus, the Guru Granth Sahib (the eternal sacred scripture), or, in a scriptural usage, the True Guru, sometimes interpreted to be God.

Guru Granth Sahib: the sacred scripture of the Sikhs revered as the living, eternal Guru.

Gurudwara: Sikh place of worship, the home of the Guru Granth Sahib.

Harmandir Sahib: popularly known as the Golden Temple, the first Sikh Gurudwara built by three of the Gurus themselves in Amritsar, Punjab, India.

Ji: a term of respect added at the end of a name.

Kakaar: One of the five articles of faith for the Khalsa, beginning with the letter K.

Kanga: a small wooden comb.

Kara: a steel bracelet.

Kashera: undergarment (shorts).

Kes: uncut hair.

Kirpan: small sword.

Khalsa: refers to the community of initiated Sikhs (pl.) or a member of this community (sing.)

Mughal Empire: the Muslim dynasty from Central Asia that ruled the Indian subcontinent during the times of the Gurus.

Naam: God's Name.

Panth: the collective community of Sikhs.

Punjab: An area in Northern India that has been partitioned since 1947 between India and Pakistan.

Punjabi: the language spoken in Punjab.

Sikh: a learner.

Vaisakhi: a spring festival commemorated in remembrance of the creation of the Khalsa.

Sikh Historical Timeline

1469	Guru Nanak is born.
1539	Guru Angad becomes the second Guru.
1552	Guru Amar Das becomes the third Guru.
1574	Guru Ram Das becomes the fourth Guru.
1581	Guru Arjan Dev becomes the fifth Guru.
1604	First installation of the scripture in Harmandir Sahib (Golden Temple), Amritsar, Punjab.
1606	Guru Arjan gives his life under Mughal oppression. Guru Hargobind becomes the sixth Guru.
1644	Guru Har Rai becomes the seventh Guru.
1661	Guru Har Krishan becomes the eighth Guru.
1664	Guru Tegh Bahadur becomes the ninth Guru.
1675	Guru Tegh Bahadur gives his life under Mughal oppression. Gobind Rai (later Gobind Singh) becomes the tenth Guru.
1699	Guru Gobind Singh creates the Khalsa.
1708	The line of human Gurus ends with the passing of Guru Gobind Singh. The sacred scripture, Guru Granth Sahib, becomes the perpetual and eternal Guru.
1708-1716	Leadership of Banda Singh Bahadur, who established Sikh rule in the Punjab.
1746-1767	Oppression of Sikhs by Mughal and Afghan rulers; Sikhs form an armed resistance.
1783	Sikh army under Baghel Singh enters Delhi, and then withdraws under an agreement with the Mughal Emperor.
1799-1839	Reign of Maharaja Ranjit Singh, who establishes the Sikh Empire based in Punjab.
1845-6	First Anglo-Sikh war.
1848-9	Second Anglo-Sikh war.
1849	British annexation of Punjab.
1907	First Gurudwara in Canada.
1912	First Gurudwara in USA.

TEN GURUS

The ten Sikh Guruships spanned from 1469-1708. One way that Sikhs picture the Guruships is as light. The Gurus embodied God's Divine light or message, which was passed from Guru to Guru. Sikhs believe that God's light is also latent within all human beings and the Guru teaches Sikhs how to kindle this light and connect with God.

After Guru Nanak, each successive Guru was a former disciple selected on the basis of merit. Each Guru indicated their successor themselves before they passed on. In the later Guruships, the lineage progressed in a family, but the model of selection based on merit prevailed. Some became Gurus at an early age, some later, serving as a reminder to Sikhs that true wisdom is not bound by age. The Gurus were based in different towns and regions within and beyond the Punjab, living family lives among people rather than in isolation. The Gurus, their sons, and their families provided male role models for the community, but the Gurus also advocated for equality between men and women. Their wives, mothers, daughters, and sisters played crucial roles throughout the Guruships. When Guru Amar Das (the third Guru) appointed and trained 146 devotees to travel to various parts of India to share Sikh teachings and unify the Sikh community, 52 of them were women. Women continue to lead and take an active role in Sikh congregations worldwide today.

GURU GRANTH SAHIB

During their own lifetimes, the Gurus compiled their compositions together with those of revered Saints from Hindu and Muslim traditions into a unique interfaith scripture. A special phonetic script was also devised by the second Guru, called *Gurmukhi* (literally meaning from the mouth of the Guru) which was very close to the alphabet of Punjabi—the commonly spoken language in Northern India.

The Gurus encouraged literacy, and the phonetic script meant that the scripture could be read and accessed by the masses, regardless of what language the particular composition was written in. The compositions were also meticulously organized

according to musical genre or *raag*, each being expressive of a certain mood or state of mind. The singing of these verses (*Kirtan*) forms an essential part of Sikh worship. A special numbering system also ensured that no additions or changes could be made to the “authenticated” text. The *Guru Granth Sahib* is 1430 pages (referred to as Ang or limbs of the Guru). Each corresponding page of every copy is identical.

In 1604, Guru Arjan ceremoniously enthroned the first compilation of the sacred scripture in the Harmandir Sahib (Golden Temple) in Amritsar, Punjab, India. It was placed under a canopy and “robed” in beautiful fabrics, while an attendant waved a *chaur sahib* (often translated as a fan or fly whisk) over it, as was done for emperors and empresses to signify their royalty and eminence. Traditional accounts describe how Guru Arjan bowed in front of the sacred scripture in reverence. The Guru also slept on the floor from that day forth as a sign of humility and as an indication that the scripture was being accorded the status of a Guru, even during the times of the human Gurus.

CREATION OF THE KHALSA

During the time of Guru Tegh Bahadur (the ninth Guru), widespread religious oppression under the Mughal Emperor Aurangzeb escalated. A group of Hindu Pandits from Kashmir approached the Guru for help. Learning of their plight, the Guru stood up to the Mughal authorities and made the supreme sacrifice. He willingly offered his life to spare the Hindu Pandits, even though he was the leader of a different religion. He resisted conversion and was subsequently beheaded in 1675 in Delhi, where the Gurudwara Sis Ganj Sahib now stands. Sikhs recall the Guru’s sacrifice as a lesson to uphold the freedom and dignity of all people to practice their respective faiths without fear of persecution.

The public execution of a respected and loved figure created shock and fear in the population. When the Guru’s son, the young Gobind Rai (who became Guru Gobind Singh, the tenth Guru) came to learn of this, he decided he would create a community of Sikhs who were fearless and courageous in the face of adversity. The Sikh way of life started by Guru

Nanak had been nurtured for 230 years by nine successive human Gurus. In 1699, it was given its final form by Guru Gobind Singh who created the Khalsa on Vaisakhi day (a spring festival).

The Khalsa is the community of initiated Sikhs. The initiation ceremony involves instilling God’s Name (Naam) within devotees through holy water (Amrit – literally meaning the “nectar of immortality”). Initiation continues today and is administered by five initiated practicing Sikhs in the presence of the Guru Granth Sahib.

The creation of the Khalsa in 1699 on Vaisakhi is important to Sikhs because it was then that Sikhs were given their distinct outward identity. They were also blessed with the names of Singh (meaning Lion, for men) and Kaur (meaning Princess, for women) signifying that they were all equals in a casteless fraternity. Guru Gobind Singh uplifted the politically downtrodden. He created an army of Saint-Soldiers who would not be afraid to stand up against oppression. Even though Sikhs do not live in the same political climate today, they still honor the notion that they have a responsibility to stand up against injustice.

The Khalsa were blessed with five gifts from the Guru to keep constantly on their person. These are called the five Kakaars and Dastaar. The following section explains these articles of faith, which are cherished by initiated Sikhs.³ Some of these are also maintained by non-initiated Sikhs.

KES

Associated values: wisdom, saintliness, sovereignty, and endurance

Kes is uncut hair. This practice is also observed by many Sikhs who have not been formally initiated. Throughout history and across cultures, hair has been associated with wisdom and spirituality. For Sikhs the uncut hair affirms an acceptance of God’s will as Creator, and the cherishing of a God-given gift. In Sikh history, during times of intense religious persecution, the kes became a powerful marker of Sikh identity, commitment, loyalty and endurance.

Comprehension Questions

Suggested answers are in italics.

1. Look at the translation of the opening verse of the Guru Granth Sahib. What is the key Sikh belief about God as described by Guru Nanak? *The notion of One God, the Creator.*
2. How do Sikhs understand the word “Guru”? *Teacher, guide, enlightener (from spiritual darkness to spiritual light).*
3. Why do Sikhs describe their sacred scripture as the Guru Granth Sahib? *They consider the scripture to be a living, eternal Guru, not just a scripture.*
4. Belonging to the Khalsa inspires certain behaviors. Choose one of the five *kakaars* or the *dastaar* and explain how you think it inspires action in the individual wearing it. Suggested answers are presented on pages 154–156.
5. How does the Khalsa identity instill a sense of belonging? *It instills a sense of outward identity and casteless fraternity.*

KANGA

Associated values: clarity, order, introspection, and detachment

The kanga is a small wooden comb which is used twice daily to comb and keep the hair tidy. The process of detangling the hair is seen as encouraging people to remove tangles from their lives, promoting clarity, introspection, order and detachment.

KIRPAN

Associated values: blessings, benevolence, dignity, and courage

The kirpan is associated with the words kirpa (blessings and benevolence) and aan (honor and dignity). The kirpan is a curved blade, kept in a sheath which is secured in a gatra (cloth sash). Crossing over one’s heart, this sash holds the kirpan in place. The gatra regulates the wearing of the kirpan, securing it in qualities such as mercy and compassion. The kirpan upholds noble values and is a constant reminder of one’s duty to defend the weak and oppressed. The kirpan is categorically

not to be used for aggression, and the right to carry the kirpan by an initiated Sikh carries with it the unflinching responsibility of never misusing it. The kirpan is also used to bless food, thus extending its association with blessings and benevolence.

KARA

Associated values: allegiance, self-awareness, and ethical conduct

The kara is an iron or steel wristlet worn on the right arm. It is commonly worn by those born into the Sikh dharam, as well as by initiated Sikhs. The kara signifies a Sikh’s allegiance, bond, and commitment to the Guru; it is a visible reminder that the Guru has taken the arm of a Sikh to carry him or her through life. It also serves as a constant reminder to be noble and ethical in one’s thoughts and actions.

KASHERA

Associated values: self-restraint, self-respect, and respecting others

The kashera is a specially designed undergarment, which closes securely with a drawstring and is changed and washed each day. By wearing the kashera a Sikh is taking an honorable vow of respect towards the opposite sex. Fidelity to one’s spouse is

Photographic representation showing the Five Kakaars (Ks) of an Initiated Sikh

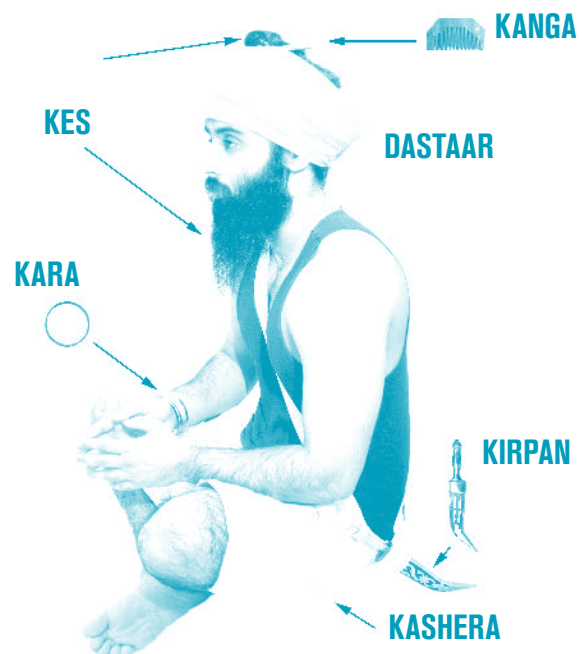


Image courtesy of Guru Nanak Nishkam Sewak Jatha.

sacred and Sikhs are prohibited from engaging in sexual relations outside wedlock. The kashera thus encourages a culture of self-restraint, self-respect and respect for others.

DASTAAR

Associated values: divinity, holiness, sovereignty, wisdom, and accomplishment

The dastaar or turban, is an integral part of Sikh identity, in addition to the five kakaars. It is worn by Sikh males, and some females. It covers, protects and crowns the head—the center of wisdom. The dastaar safeguards the uncut hair of a Sikh, which is tied in a topknot underneath. It is not put on or taken off like a hat or cap, but tied anew daily. To ask for it to be removed inconsiderately in public is demeaning and disrespectful to the wearer. In cultures the world over, the turban has signified divinity, holiness, sovereignty, wisdom and accomplishment—all qualities that are embedded in the wearing of the Sikh turban.

When a young boy transitions from wearing a patka (a cloth which is tied to cover the topknot), to a dastaar, a ceremony called the dastaar-bandi takes place, in which a respected member of the community or family will tie the dastaar on him in the presence of the Guru Granth Sahib.

AUTHORITY VESTED IN GURU GRANTH AND GURU PANTH

Through the creation of the Khalsa in 1699, Guru Gobind Singh established Guru Panth, or the “Guru’s community”—indicating that the presence of the Guru would still dwell amongst the community of practicing disciples. He also declared that after him, spiritual authority would rest in the Guru Granth Sahib, the sacred scripture (from 1708-forever).

WHO IS A SIKH? A LIVELY DEBATE

There is an active debate in the Sikh community over the questions “who is a Sikh?” and “who constitutes the Panth?” This debate is similar to those that are taking place within the communities of other world religions. The 3B Framework mentioned earlier in this chapter, which focuses on belief, behavior, and belonging, offers a useful context for understanding this debate.

In the view of many Sikhs, having a belief in one God, the ten Gurus, and the Guru Granth Sahib makes a person a Sikh. Some members of the community question whether one can be a considered a member of the Panth without having undertaken the initiation that was mentioned above in the description of the Khalsa. This is a significant question because the number of Sikhs who are or have been initiated is currently a minority within the larger community. Some Sikhs acknowledge that they do not belong to the Khalsa, but see initiation as an ideal to which to aspire at some point in their lives. Others believe that initiation is essential as an entry point, because they hope that belonging to the Khalsa will inspire the necessary beliefs and behaviors. Some other Sikhs express the viewpoint that some initiates can outwardly belong to the Khalsa, but inwardly remain far from being a Sikh by demonstrating poor behavior or by not living up to the teachings of the Gurus in everyday life. From their perspective, behavior that conforms to Sikh beliefs is an essential criterion for determining whether a person is a Sikh.

As in many other religious traditions, a sense of identity and a feeling of belonging to the community play a very important role. For many, being born into a Sikh family and knowing about Sikh beliefs and the Sikh heritage is central to their sense of belonging. For others, having a family connection to the Punjab, or to the Punjabi language and culture, is the basis of their Sikh identity.

These issues all sustain lively debates within the Sikh community. Ultimately, however, Gurudwaras are welcoming to all and inclusive in nature. Sikhs believe that each individual’s journey is unique and that we are all learners on the path toward leading a truthful life.

NOTES

1. American Academy of Religion, *Guidelines for Teaching About Religion in K-12 Schools in the United States* (Atlanta: American Academy of Religion, 2010), i. These Guidelines are reproduced in Appendix 2 of this book.
2. This section includes adaptations from Gopinder Kaur et. al., *Edexcel AS Religious Studies: Student Book* (mixed media product: United Kingdom, Edexcel, 2008).
3. Adapted from the Guru Nanak Nishkam Sewak Jatha pamphlet, “The Five Kakaars and Dastaar.”