

## The Sikhs (Religion 3150)

James Lochtefeld

Religion, Carthage College, Kenosha, Wisconsin

The Sikhs is an upper-level Religion class, and has been offered five times at Carthage College since Fall 2006. The course is a broad survey of Sikh religion, history, and culture from the time of Guru Nanak to the present. The first part of the class is primarily historical, and traces the development of the community and its religious ideas from Guru Nanak through the late 19th century. The focus then shifts to lived religious life, from worship to life-cycle rituals to the Rahit to popular practices. The final part resumes the historical focus by looking at the twentieth century history, particularly the troubles in 1947 and 1984, and then examines varying sociological topics, such as gender, caste, contemporary politics, and the community's efforts to define itself in a world religious community.

Since the College is 28 miles from the Oak Creek Gurudwara, the class opens by discussing the events of Aug. 2009. This highlights the Sikhs as a local religious community--of whom most of the students are unaware--and the reality of hate crimes in contemporary America. From an instructional perspective, I wanted to discuss this tragic event early in the class, rather than building up to it all semester as we work toward contemporary times.

This course had its seed in coincidence. In September 1987 Gurinder Singh Mann was one of my entering colleagues in the Columbia Ph.D. program; since then he has been my friend and colleague, as well as being my teacher, since I audited Columbia's first class on the Sikhs in Spring 1989. Ten years later I began taking students to India, and Amritsar has always been on the itinerary. Over multiple visits I grew more entranced by the Darbar Sahib's aesthetic beauty, and filled with admiration for the piety, generosity, and sincerity of the Sikhs there (and in other places). The course has been well-received, and I am delighted to introduce my students to this relatively small but highly vibrant community.

In teaching this class I am acutely conscious of my limitations—I do not speak Punjabi, though I have learned the Gurmukhi script well enough (given past work with Braj poetry) to read the Guru Granth Sahib, slowly. So I am especially grateful for Gurinder Singh Mann's generosity with his time—in answering email queries, in visiting in person in Fall 2009, and in talking with subsequent classes by Skype. I have learned something every single time.

