

An Introduction to Sikhism :

Theme 2: Religious concepts

Knowledge and understanding of
religion and belief

2A Philosophical concepts of God AO2

Theme 2: Religious concepts

Knowledge and understanding of religion and belief

A.	<p>Exploring Sikh teachings concerning self, death, afterlife and meaning and purpose of life, with reference to:</p> <p>Philosophical understanding of the Sikh concept of God:</p> <p>God is the one, the only one and the one without a second; symbolism of Ik Onkar (Adi Granth 929,1035,1037); God as personal – Adi Granth 784, 1190; God as nirguna (without attributes) and saguna (with attributes); God as omnipotent and omniscient; God as creator and sustainer of life – Adi Granth 25, 684,700; God as immanent and transcendent.</p>
B.	<p>The soul:</p> <p>Nature of the soul - divine spark of Waheguru, ethereal and non-material; union with Waheguru. The aim of breaking cycle of rebirth; journey of the soul through many life forms to attain this aim; stages of development on the path of enlightenment including stage of Saram Khand, the realm of effort and realm of grace; monist and monotheistic understanding of the relationship between God and the soul.</p>
C.	<p>Karma, rebirth and mukti:</p> <p>Philosophical understanding of the path of liberation – replacement of ignorance by spiritual enlightenment affected by God's Grace – it is the meaning and purpose of life; the role of karma and transmigration of the soul; union with God – Adi Granth 1127, 905, 275 as the meaning and purpose of Sikh life.</p>

Issues for analysis and evaluation will be drawn from any aspect of the content above, such as:

- The relevant importance of the Sikh concept of God in relation to other concepts.
- Whether the most important Sikh teaching about God is that God is personal.
- The impact of Sikh teachings about the soul on the Sikh view of humanity.
- The relationship between God and the soul in Sikhism – monist or monotheistic.
- The relevance of Sikh beliefs about rebirth and mukti for Sikhs today.
- The influence of belief in karma on Sikh lifestyle.

**SPECIFICATION
CONTENT:**

The relevant importance of the Sikh concept of God in relation to other concepts.

A02 Activity

**Possible lines of
argument**

Listed below are some conclusions that could be drawn from the AO2 reasoning in the accompanying text:

- One can take the view that Sikh teachings foreground many social values and that 'God' is an additional, rather than central, concept.
- One can view all Sikh teachings, values and practices as flowing from the Sikh concept of God and from the importance the Gurus gave to its practical implications.
- The Sikh concept of God and Sikh concepts of living go hand in hand; everyday values can be seen as the expression of a person's 'spiritual' identity, which reflects the 'spark of God' inside all.

Consider each of the conclusions drawn above and collect evidence and examples to support each argument from the AO1 and AO2 material studied in this section. Select one conclusion that you think is most convincing and explain why it is so. Now contrast this with the weakest conclusion in the list, justifying your argument with clear reasoning and evidence.

Theme 2: Religious concepts

A: Issues for analysis and evaluation

From what we have learnt about the teachings of the Sikh Gurus, a central concern for them was clearly the lived practice of values. They placed a great deal of importance on living with integrity, exercising social compassion and social responsibility and overcoming traits such as hypocrisy, greed and exploitation. They took steps to foster the practice of core concepts such as truthful living, service to others and respect for religious and cultural diversity.

One conclusion that could be drawn from this is that the most important concepts advanced by the Gurus concerned the application of what people might refer to as human, humanitarian, social or citizenship values. 'God' might consequently be viewed as an element of Sikh mystical belief which features in addition to these values, rather than as a major underlying concept which frames Sikh thought and practice.

An alternative perspective is that the concept of God is absolutely central to the Sikh *dharam* or way of life. It is encapsulated in the *Ik Onkār* symbol which majestically opens the teachings contained in the Gurū Granth Sāhib and which repeatedly heads new cycles of verse. Its reoccurring inclusion suggests that the Sikh concept of God is the source of the world-view, motivation and rationale for all Sikh values, teachings and practices.

It follows from this that, for the Gurus, it was not just the 'concept' but conviction of God's presence that was of central importance and what actually flows from that in one's day-to-day living. More important than 'belief' in God was a person's ability to consider the practical implications of accepting that a sacred reality exists. The Gurus were concerned to demonstrate, for example, the implications of associated concepts such as: 1) oneness, to help foster some approaches to social cohesion; 2) eternal truth, to highlight life's temporary nature and encourage people to live in more meaningful ways; 3) a higher power, to inspire more humility and acceptance; 4) an omniscient consciousness, to draw people to live in more self-aware and accountable ways; 5) God as a source of benevolence and grace, free of fear and hate, to prompt people to cultivate such a spiritual identity in themselves.

A related perspective is that the Sikh ethos for living is thus defined not just by human or social values, but what we can term as 'spiritual' values. This is because certain values (e.g. love, integrity, contentment, forgiveness) are seen to emanate from an innate 'spark' of God which rests latent inside everyone. In society, different values can be 'deified' or worshipped, such as having wealth, power or status. The message of *Ik Onkār* can be viewed not only as a philosophical statement but as a social calling to people to transform their life perspective and hence the values, sentiments and goals they may feel compelled to live by. In this regard the Sikh concept of God and Sikh concepts for living go hand in hand.

**SPECIFICATION
CONTENT:**

Whether the most
important teaching
about God is that God is
personal

A02 Activity

**Possible lines of
argument**

Listed below are some
conclusions that could
be drawn from the
A02 reasoning in the
accompanying text:

- In one respect,
Sikh teaching clearly
foregrounds a non-
personal view of God,
resisting moves to confine
God to images of a
person-like deity

- A striking feature of Sikh
teaching is the way God
is indeed portrayed as
a personality, fostering
attitudes of loving
devotion as well a faith
that humans can foster
associated dispositions
within themselves.

- Sikh teaching, as a
whole, encourages one
to accept a paradoxical
understanding, that God is
both a non-personal and
personal, allowing for our
perspectives to change
and evolve over time.

Consider each of the
conclusions drawn above
and collect evidence and
examples to support each
argument from the A01
and A02 material studied
in this section. Select
one conclusion that you
think is most convincing
and explain why it is so.
Now contrast this with
the weakest conclusion
in the list, justifying your
argument with clear
reasoning and evidence.

Theme 2: Religious concepts

A: Issues for analysis and evaluation

Whether the most important Sikh teaching about God is that God is personal.

We have learnt so far how the symbolism of *Ik Onkār* and its elaboration in Sikh teachings brings together both non-personal and personal conceptualisations of God. One can take different views as to which is the most important and how we may respond to this paradox.

One view is that the foremost identifier of God in Sikh teaching is a numeral rather than a name, i.e. the north Indian symbol for 1 which is the first character of *Ik Onkār*. This suggests that God is conceived primarily as a oneness, a unity, a cohesive and all-inclusive reality, which is *nirankār* (without form) and *nirgun* (without attributes), yet *sargun* (with attributes) when manifested in the diverse expanse of creation.

God is also conceived as having an all-pervading, resonant presence which holds existence together and which is referred to as *nām*. God is viewed also as *gyot*, a flame, light or spark which is latent in everything. Both these identities invite a non-personal view which conceives God as an underlying force or energy which enables and sustains creation.

In India, the concept of a divine reality came to be expressed through the form of various Hindu deities which had become focal points of devotion. One can argue that the Sikh Gurus' focus on a singular and formless God was a means to transcend those personalised images which become generated according to people's accumulated cultural experiences in the world.

From another perspective, however, the conception of God as personal is a striking feature of Sikh teaching. The placing of *Ik Onkār* at the start of the *Mūl Mantar* prayer sets it within a view of God as an enlightened consciousness and creative being, characterised by certain benevolent dispositions. This directs us towards relating to God as a personality and encourages the view that such a personality lies innate within each of us.

Expanding on this, Sikh teaching is replete with metaphors of God as an agent or doer (e.g. Nurturer, Protector) and as a person one can lovingly relate to (e.g. a Mother/Father, Friend and Beloved). God is also often addressed as 'You'. In Punjabi this is done by using the second person pronoun '*tū*', which, like the French *tu* (as opposed to *vous*) signifies a close, intimate and informal bond. God is thus conceived as a focus for devotion in ways that are not possible through a non-personal depiction.

The breadth and flow of Sikh teaching can lead one to conclude that it encourages a certain acceptance of paradoxes. Within a single line, Gurbānī teaches: '*You have thousands of eyes, yet you have no eye; You have thousands of forms, yet you have none either...*' (Guru Granth Sahib, p. 13). Rather than presenting a systematic theory of belief, the verses of Gurbānī teach from different starting points. This allows for a person's understandings to evolve and be revisited over time.