dissolved, and all would be recognized as equals by the fact of their humanity. A truly revolutionary social reformer, Guru Nanak also condemned the mistreatment of women in his time, proclaiming them the equals of men in every respect—political, social, and religious—over two and a half centuries before the founding of the United States.

**Khalsa**

On March 30, 1699, Guru Gobind Singh—the tenth and final human Guru—revealed a new, voluntary order of the Sikhs, called the *Khalsa* (meaning "belonging only to the Divine"). The *Khalsa* consists of Sikhs who undergo a initiation ceremony and dedicate themselves to living by the high standards of the Sikh Gurus at all times, as well as maintaining their physical distinctiveness in society by maintaining five articles of faith. The *Khalsa*, a global human fellowship, upheld the highest Sikh virtues through the harshest and most difficult times in Sikh history.

One of the more conspicuous and noteworthy of the articles of faith is the *Kesh* (uncut hair), which is kept covered by a distinctive turban. The other articles are the *Kirpan* (ceremonial sword), *Kara* (metal bracelet), *Kanga* (comb) and *Kaccha* (under-shorts). They all have deep religious meanings for Sikhs, who wear them to honor the teachings, wishes, and memory of their beloved Gurus.
The word Sikh means disciple or student. Sikhs are students and followers of Guru Nanak (b. 1469), the founder of the Sikh religious tradition, and the nine prophet-teachers—called Gurus—who succeeded him. Though sometimes mistaken for members of a sect of Hinduism or Islam, Sikhs belong to a distinct religion with its own unique, divine scriptures, which are collected in the Guru Granth Sahib, the eternal spiritual guide of the Sikhs. This extraordinarily poetic treasure of sacred and practical wisdom contains not only the writings of the Sikh Gurus, but remarkably, those of Muslim and Hindu saints as well. It is also notable in that the holy text was written by the Gurus themselves, without the use of any intermediaries.

Sikhism's central theological belief is that there is one God for all of creation, a loving Creator attainable through meditation upon and remembrance of God's Name. In addition, Sikhs are enjoined to lead moral lives, earn their living through hard work and honest means, and to share the fruits of their labor through charitable contributions and work. Sikhism is a way of life that advocates the practice of holistic life experiences—work, worship, and service—in order to attain perpetual union with God, while creating a just social order in this world. A Sikh is enjoined to lead a wholesome family lifestyle, and to avoid celibacy or asceticism as a means of reaching God. Spurred by their religion's dictates, Sikhs have a long, celebrated heritage of speaking out against injustice, and standing up for the defenseless.

The twenty-two million Sikhs worldwide trace the origin of their religion to Punjab, meaning the land of the five rivers, located in present-day Pakistan and northern India. Now the fifth largest religion in the world, Sikhism is universal in that it is open to all, and that it recognizes and respects all human beings as equals. Just as God transcends the boundaries of race, class, gender, and ethnicity, the Sikh religion dismisses such earthly distinctions. The Sikh religion is profoundly egalitarian and democratic, as its adherents believe steadfastly that all people have civil rights, including the freedom of religion. Sikh doctrine resonates with the Gurus' belief that all people have the right to follow their own path to God, without condemnation or coercion from others.

Nearly five centuries ago, Sikhism's founder, Guru Nanak, denounced the invidious, wretched caste system that still plagues Indian society today. He strove to create a spiritual community in which such marks of social status would be