Combating Racism and Prejudice in Schools: Keynotes

Keynote 9
Indian Religions: Sikhism

The following information is also relevant to Keynote 9:

The Introduction: Background information outlining the context and purpose of the project.

Keynote 1 – Violence and Conflict: Issues and Strategies for Schools: A theoretical background to understanding conflict and violence and how schools can address issues of intolerance.

Keynote 2 – A Whole-School Approach to Combating Racism and Prejudice: An audit strategy for schools to plan and monitor their approaches to combating racism. This is adapted from Racism No Way (www.racismnoway.com.au/strategies/framework/body-Schools.html); a web site aimed at teachers seeking to challenge and counter racism.

The following Keynotes cover the nine most significantly represented religions in Australia and include suggestions for classroom activities:

Keynote 3 – The Abrahamic Religions: Judaism, Christianity and Islam
Keynote 4 – The Abrahamic Religions: Judaism
Keynote 5 - The Abrahamic Religions: Middle Eastern Christians
Keynote 6 – The Abrahamic Religions: Islam
Keynote 7 – Arabs and Muslims in Australia
Keynote 8 – Indian Religions: Hinduism
Keynote 9 – Indian Religions: Sikhism (this document)
Keynote 10 – Indian Religions: Buddhism
Keynote 11 – Bahá’í Faith

You can also download a full version of Combating Racism and Prejudice in Schools, which includes all of the Keynotes listed above. This full document, as well as all of the above sections can be downloaded from the Keynotes Explained (http://www.education.vic.gov.au/studentlearning/programs/multicultural/tchkeynotes.htm) web page on the Multicultural Education http://www.education.vic.gov.au/studentlearning/programs/multicultural/default.htm) site.
# Table of Contents

Introduction ........................................................................................................................... 3  
Origins and history of Sikhism ............................................................................................. 3  
Beliefs ................................................................................................................................... 5  
  - Concept of God ........................................................................................................... 5  
  - Doctrines ................................................................................................................... 5  
  - Nature of the World .................................................................................................. 6  
  - Cosmology and Cosmogony ...................................................................................... 6  
  - Goal of life ................................................................................................................ 6  
  - The Sikh Path ............................................................................................................ 6  
  - The Truth .................................................................................................................. 6  
  - Emphasis on Deeds ................................................................................................... 6  
  - Equality and Justice ................................................................................................ 6  
Sacred texts .......................................................................................................................... 7  
  - The Guru Granth Sahib .............................................................................................. 7  
Religious observances............................................................................................................. 7  
Rites of passage ................................................................................................................... 7  
Festivals ................................................................................................................................ 8  
  - Gurpurbs .................................................................................................................. 8  
  - Festivals coinciding with Hindu festivals ................................................................. 9  
Customs ............................................................................................................................... 10  
  - Sikh dress ............................................................................................................... 10  
  - Food ......................................................................................................................... 10  
  - Place of women in Sikhism ........................................................................................ 10  
  - Service ..................................................................................................................... 10  
  - Communal dining ..................................................................................................... 10  
Settlement and history in Australia ..................................................................................... 11  
Population: Sikhs in Australia ............................................................................................... 12  
  - Major birthplaces of Sikhs in Australia .................................................................... 12  
Community organisations .................................................................................................... 13  
Considerations for schools .................................................................................................. 13  
In the classroom ................................................................................................................... 13  
Useful websites .................................................................................................................... 15  
Bibliography ........................................................................................................................ 15
Introduction

Sikhism is the youngest of the world’s four great monotheistic religions. The fifth largest religion in the world, it was founded in the 15th century by Guru Nanak Dev (1469–1539) in the Punjab, a part of India which is now in Pakistan.

‘Sikh’ is Punjabi for ‘disciple’ and the Sikhs are disciples of Guru Nanak. Sikhs believe that the one, living God created the universe, sustains it and, in the end, will destroy it. Sikhs follow the teachings of the 10 Sikh Gurus that are enshrined in the Guru Granth Sahib, the Sikh holy book.

There are almost 23 million Sikhs, 80 percent of whom live in the Punjab state in north-west India where the faith began. There are also about 400,000 in the UK, 350,000 in the United States, 300,000 in Canada and smaller communities in Europe, Africa, South-east Asia and Australia. (Racism. No Way!, “An introduction to Sikhism” (http://www.racismnoway.com.au/classroom/factsheets/31.html)

Sikhism contains elements of both Hinduism and Islam. “From Hinduism it adopts the doctrine of reincarnation and karma and from Islam stems its monotheism and rejection of the caste system” (Arquilevich).

Sikhism rejects worship of idols and religious rituals. It regards men and women as equal and advocates tolerance of all religions. It should be noted that many Sikhs reject, and indeed find offensive, the view of borrowing from Hinduism and Islam, and believe their religion was directly revealed by God.

Origins and history of Sikhism

The spiritual founder of Sikhism, Guru Nanak, was born a Hindu (1469) at a time when the Muslims ruled India. Moved by his own profound experience of God, he began to spread a simple message which begins with…

Ek Ong Kar: there is One God, named Truth, Creator, without fear, without enmity, timeless, immortal, is neither born, nor dies self-existent, is revealed by the Grace of the Guru. Truth in the beginning, truth through the ages, true now, truth shall ever be… (Guru Granth Sahib p.1).

Guru Nanak is responsible for the saying "There is no Hindu, there is no Muslim", which has since become one of the pillars of Sikhism.

Guru Nanak went on long tours throughout India and the Middle East to spread his message through discussions and hymn-singing. He set up centres of worship and stressed the values of spiritual life and the practice of meditation in his teachings.

Guru Nanak raised a strong voice against tyranny and the exploitation of ordinary people by rulers and priests. He gave concrete expression to his ideas on unity, equality and fraternity through the institution of sangat (assembly for worship) and pangat (a line of devotees seated on the floor to eat meals from the langar or community kitchen).
The Hindu caste system divided people strictly into social groups but Guru Nanak taught that all people were equal. His followers came from all social groups but they learned, meditated, sang hymns and ate together. (Racism. No Way!, “An introduction to Sikhism”) (http://www.racismnoway.com.au/classroom/factsheets/31.html)

In his 50th year, Guru Nanak and his followers built a settlement called Kartapur on the banks of the Ravi River in the Punjab where they erected the first Sikh temple. Just before Guru Nanak passed away he nominated one of his closest followers, Guru Angad as his successor. This established a pattern for the appointment of a succession of nine Gurus who led the movement until 1708. The nine successor Gurus elucidated, developed and applied to socio-political situations what was revealed and taught by Guru Nanak. Sikhism is based on the teachings of these ten Gurus as recorded in the Guru Granth Sahib.

Guru Angad, the second Guru, gave a definitive distinction to the teachings of Guru Nanak and had them recorded in a special modified script called Gurmukhi, which he perfected.

Guru Amardas followed Guru Angad and developed the institution of common dining, which brought about a profound revolution shaking the foundations of the caste system. Guru Amardas worked for the betterment of women and appointed them as preachers. He forbade the practice of ‘purdah’ (the veiling of women) and ‘satti’ (self immolation by women on the funeral pyre of their husband).

Guru Ram Das succeeded Guru Armadas and founded the city of Amritsar. He started construction of Sikhism’s holiest shrine, the Harmandar Sahib, popularly known as the Golden Temple.

The fifth Guru, Guru Arjan, consolidated Amritsar as the capital of the Sikh world, and compiled the first authorised Sikh collection of sacred spiritual scriptures, known as the Adi Granth. Guru Arjan was executed in 1606 by the Emperor.

The martyrdom of Guru Arjan proved to be a turning point in the history of the Sikh faith. It marked the beginning of a period of Sikh militarism as they sought to defend their faith.

The sixth Guru, Hargobind, adorned himself with two swords of Miri and Piri symbolizing spiritual and temporal authorities. This denotes a basic principle of the Sikh religion that the spiritual and temporal aspects of life cannot be separated.

The ninth Guru, Tegh Bahadur, assumed power after the untimely death of the eighth Guru at the age of eight. The Guru championed religious freedom, not just of Sikhs, but of Muslims and Hindus. He challenged the forced conversions of Hindus to Islam and was then threatened with death if he himself refused to convert. He was executed in 1675 for refusing the ultimatum and is particularly revered for sacrificing his life for the religious freedom of another faith.

Before his death, the tenth Guru, Guru Gobind Singh, transferred his authority as Guru to the Sikh community and to the Sikh holy book, the Adi Granth or Guru Granth Sahib, to which he had made some final additions. He initiated five soldiers, known as the Five Beloved, into a new community order called the Khalsa. Today,
this term is used for the society of fully committed adult members of the Sikh community.

Sikhs had always regarded the Punjab region in northern India as their spiritual home. In 1799 they gained control of the Punjab, and a stable period of Sikh rule ensued for 40 years. A period of British colonial rule followed in which the Sikhs continued to be an important political and religious force.

When British colonial rule of India ceased in 1947 and the country was partitioned into a mostly Muslim Pakistan and a mostly Hindu India, part of the Punjab fell into Pakistan. This led to a mass migration of Sikhs (and Hindus) from Pakistan to India and a reverse migration of Muslims.

The 20th century saw many Sikhs leave the Punjab area and the spread of the Sikh faith.

Beliefs

Sikhs share with Hindus a belief in:

- *karma*, the sum of one’s good and bad deeds
- reincarnation
- *samsara*, the repetitive cycle of birth and death

However, Sikhs reject the caste system of the Hindu religion and believe that everyone has equal status in the eyes of God. Sikhs are prohibited from worshipping idols, images, or icons.

Sikhs believe in the theory of transmigration. Having passed through all of the lower forms of life, humankind is now in the most developed stage of sentient beings – those able to help themselves through self-will and the spiritual side of human nature. The objective of Sikhs is to gain ‘union’ with God and attain *anand* (bliss) before and after death.

Concept of God

Sikhism is a monotheistic faith that believes God is the only ‘Absolute One’, who created the entire universe. God’s relationship with man is that of Creator and created. He is benevolent and looks after His creation lovingly.

Doctrines

A basic doctrine of Sikh faith is that all 10 Gurus were one in spirit. Another doctrine is that the Message is the real Guru, not a physical body. This explains the conferment of the Guruship to the Guru Granth Sahib, in which God’s word is enshrined, as revealed through the Gurus.

The doctrine of *miri-piri* is based on the basic principle of the Sikh religion that the spiritual and temporal aspects of life cannot be separated.

The Sikh doctrine proclaims freedom from caste bondage, from the shadows of past
birth, superstitions, false notions of lineage and the stigma of so-called low occupations.

Nature of the World

Sikhs believe the world to be real. Guru Nanak says, ‘Real are Thy continents and universes. Real are the worlds and the forms created by Thee’.

Cosmology and Cosmogony

Guru Nanak says that there are hundreds of thousands of other worlds and universes. It is a futile exercise trying to guess their number.

Goal of life

The Sikh ideal is to become a Gurmukh, one who is completely attuned to God’s will. His love for God is expressed in the form of altruistic deeds or service to mankind.

The Sikh Path

The Gurus preached that worldly activities are no hindrance to spiritual progress. Rather, they are complementary and essential to each other.

The Truth

The Guru says, ‘Truth is higher than everything. Higher still is truthful living or the practice of truth in life’.

Emphasis on Deeds

Love of God has to be translated into love of humanity. Love can be expressed only through altruistic deeds. Guru Nanak says, ‘Approval or rejection in the court of God is determined only on the basis of one’s actions in this life’.

Equality and Justice

The Sikh religion does not sanction any discrimination based on caste, colour or sex. God is the Father and all human beings are His children. Women are considered equal with men in all spheres: social, political and religious.

A Sikh should be just in dealings with others, dispense full justice when in authority, and fight for justice for the oppressed, the downtrodden and the weak. For this, the Sikh should be spiritually inspired and physically fit. A Sikh has to try to live as a saint–soldier.

Guru Nanak never claimed that only his disciples could get salvation. He said whosoever meditates upon one God, the Formless, will get salvation.
Sacred texts

The Guru Granth Sahib

The Guru Granth Sahib is the sacred Scripture of the Sikhs. It contains the compositions of the Sikh Gurus, panegyrics of the various bards who attended the Gurus, and also some hymns of Hindu and Muslim saints.

Every copy of the Guru Granth Sahib is an exact replica of the original and is always 1,430 pages long.

Sikhs regard the message of the scriptures as the present-day embodiment of the Sikh Guru, so they treat the Guru Granth Sahib with the respect and devotion they would give a human Guru.

Religious observances

Sikhs generally reject religious practices associated with the ideas of sacrament and ritual, pilgrimage and fasting. Worship is confined to prayer, reading of Scriptures, singing of hymns and meditation.

The Sikh place of worship is called a gurdwara which means Guru's door. Every gurdwara has the Guru Granth Sahib on a special cot (manji) on a throne (takht) at the front of the room used for worship (the diwan hall). There is always a kitchen and a dining room because sharing a meal (langar) together after the service is an essential part of Sikh worship. (Racism. No Way!, “An introduction to Sikhism”).

There is no ordained ministry, although some people (granthi, sometimes referred to as priests) are trained to read and expound the Guru Granth Sahib, which lies at the centre of Sikh ritual.

A Sikh can worship at any time during the day but expected prayer times are before sunrise and sunset and before going to bed.

Rites of passage

Certain ceremonies hold special religious significance in the life of the Sikh.

The naming ceremony

Babies are named in a religious service at the temple. The Scriptures are opened to a randomly chosen page, and the first letter of the first word is identified as the first letter of the baby’s name. The family then chooses a name that is common to the sex of the child. The name Singh (lion) is added for boys; the name Kaur (princess), for girls.

Pahul/Amrit (baptism)

The Amrit ceremony is the initiation rite introduced by Guru Gobind Singh when he founded the Khalsa in 1699. Amrit is usually administered to those who volunteer to follow the path and can occur at any age.
The initiates, men and women or boys and girls, take Amrit. Amrit is prepared with water to which some sugar is stirred with a khanda (a double edged sword) and prayers recited. This is then sprinkled on to the head, the eyes and given to drink.

Those who have taken Amrit are referred to as the Khalsa. Khalsa or saint-soldiers are committed to a code of ethical conduct. The Khalsa is required to wear the five articles of faith at all times (see below - Sikh dress) Wearing these articles is mandatory. N.B. It is estimated that only around 10 to 15 percent of Sikhs are baptised.

**Marriage**

Any respected Sikh may perform the ceremony of marriage. Weddings may be conducted in the temple or in a family home. There is no divorce in the Sikh religion, though civil divorce is permitted. Traditionally, marriages were arranged by families.

**Death ceremony**

For Sikhs, birth and death are closely associated. A person has simply discarded his or body, but the soul lives on. It has a new beginning, having either realised God, or is reborn for another opportunity to reach God.

After death the body is bathed and dressed and taken to the Crematorium. Before cremation a prayer is offered seeking salvation for the departed soul. After the cremation, the relatives and friends go to the Gurdwara to read a passage from Guru Granth Sahib. Possibly the following day the ashes are collected and immersed in flowing water in the nearest river or sea. It is forbidden to erect a monument over the remains of the dead.

A complete reading of Guru Granth Sahib is done either at home or in the Gurdwara, and a final Ardas or prayer for the salvation of the departed soul and for strength for the relatives to accept God’s will is offered.

**Festivals**

Sikhs use the same lunar calendar as Hindus and share some of the same holidays which they celebrate in a distinctive way.

**Gurpurbs**

Gurpurbs are festivals that are associated with the lives of the Gurus. The most important are:

- **the birthday of Guru Nanak**, founder of Sikhism (April or November)
- **the birthday of Guru Gobind Singh**, founder of the Khalsa (January)
- **the martyrdom of Guru Arjan** (June)
- **the martyrdom of Guru Tegh Bahadur** (November/December)
- **First installation of Guru Granth Sahib**, after completion of Guru Granth Sahib in 1604 Guru Arjan installed it in Harmnadir Sahib, the Golden Temple. This event is celebrated on 1st of September of each year.
- **Guru Granth Sahib proclaimed as Eternal Guru of the Sikhs**, Guru Gobind Singh before passing away ordained Guru Granth Sahib as the Eternal Guru of the Sikhs in 1708. This event is celebrated on 20th of October each year.

**Festivals coinciding with Hindu festivals**

**Vaisakhi** is the Sikh New Year festival and is celebrated on April 13 or 14th. It also commemorates 1699, the year Sikhism was born as a collective faith.

**Divali** is the Festival of Light and is held in October or November. Sikhs give the festival a special meaning by celebrating the release of Guru Hargobind from imprisonment at Gwalior.

**Hola Mahalla** occurs in March and coincides with *Holi*, the Hindu festival of colours. Guru Gobind Singh started this festival as a day for Sikhs to practise their military exercises and hold mock battles.
Customs

Sikh dress

Women of the Sikh faith wear a head covering. Men of the Sikh faith are particularly easy to identify because they have a full beard and keep their hair uncut and contained in a turban. Sikh boys wear their hair in a modified version of the adult style.

Every baptised Sikh male and female makes a vow to wear the Five ‘Ks’: Each of the Five Ks has a particular religious significance.

1. *Kesh* – uncut hair and beard, and a turban (the crown of spirituality).


4. *Kara* – a steel bracelet around the wrist.

5. *Kirpan* – the holy sword.

Food

Guru Nanak is reputed to have said religion “is not incompatible with laughing, eating, playing and dressing well”.

Many Sikhs are vegetarians although some eat meat. Even if they are not vegetarian, Sikhs tend not to eat beef. They are forbidden to eat any meat which has been ritually slaughtered e.g. halal or kosher.

Place of women in Sikhism

From the beginning of Sikhism women have been regarded as equals. A Sikh woman was considered to have the same soul as a man and an equal right to grow spiritually.

A Sikh woman can lead religious congregations, work as a Granthi (priest) or a preacher and participate freely in all religious, cultural, social, political and secular activities.

Service

*Sewa*, the practice of service to others is an important element of Sikh behaviour.

Communal dining

*Langar*, the practice of community dining was established by Guru Nanak as an expression of equality of all peoples. Sharing a meal which men and women have prepared together follows a worship service.
Settlement and history in Australia


It is difficult to separate the history of early Sikh arrivals in Australia from that of others from South Asia. It appears that the first Sikhs came sometime after the 1830s to work as shepherds and farm labourers. In the 1860s cameleers commonly called ‘Ghans’ (short for Afghans) were brought to Australia. Amongst them were many Sikhs. Other Sikhs arrived as free settlers and worked as hawkers and were joined by some of the earlier cameleers. Some hawkers became so successful they had their own stores. In 1890 Baba Ram Singh and Otim (Uttam) Singh arrived and in 1907 established "The People Stores". Baba Ram Singh lived to be 106. He is thought to have brought the first Guru Granth Sahib to Australia in the early 1920s.

In the 1890s nearly 250 Sikhs worked on the sugar cane fields in Queensland. Others worked clearing bushland and establishing pastures for sheep and cattle. Later some Sikhs moved south to the New South Wales north coast, continued farming, established communities and built Australia’s first purpose-built gurdwara in Woolgoolga.

In the 1960s, Australia’s first two Sikh temples were built north of Coffs Harbour, NSW.

From 1901 until the 1970s Government policy made immigration for Sikhs difficult and there were few new arrivals. However, since then Sikh settlers mainly from India and Sri Lanka but also from other countries including Malaysia, Singapore, Fiji, Kenya, Uganda and the United Kingdom have come to Australia.
Population: Sikhs in Australia

Major birthplaces of Sikhs in Australia

The census of 2001, recorded 17,381 Sikhs in Australia, a 44.4 percent increase in population since 1996 which makes it amongst the fastest growing religions in Australia. The following birthplaces were recorded as significant.

Table 9.1 Major birthplaces of Sikhs in Australia

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Birthplace</th>
<th>Number</th>
<th>% of Religion</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>India</td>
<td>9736</td>
<td>56.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Australia</td>
<td>4040</td>
<td>23.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Malaysia</td>
<td>1181</td>
<td>6.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Singapore</td>
<td>517</td>
<td>3.0</td>
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<tr>
<td>United Kingdom</td>
<td>513</td>
<td>3.0</td>
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<tr>
<td>Kenya</td>
<td>246</td>
<td>1.4</td>
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<tr>
<td>Fiji</td>
<td>223</td>
<td>1.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New Zealand</td>
<td>175</td>
<td>1.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pakistan</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>0.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thailand</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>0.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>642</td>
<td>3.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>17,381</strong></td>
<td><strong>100</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Department of Immigration and Citizenship *The People of Australia. Birthplace of Selected Religious Groups – Australia 2001 Census.*
Community organisations

Sikh communities are organised around temples (gurdwaras) and tend to be congregationally structured. There are also state-level organisations.

Currently in Victoria there are gurdwaras in Cranbourne, Keysborough, Blackburn and Craigieburn. There are also Sikh congregations meeting in Shepparton and Werribee.

The Melbourne Sikh Youth Wing, initiated by the Sikh Welfare Council of Victoria, is now is a stand-alone Youth Wing which organises activities throughout the year.

The Victorian Sikh Association (VSA) is the longest continuously serving Sikh community group in Victoria. The VSA aims to promote sporting, social and cultural events to improve and foster links between its members and the wider Australian community.

Sikh Interfaith Council of Victoria (SICV) was formed in 2002 with the view to represent Sikhs in multi-faith platforms in Victoria. SICV promotes and works for dialogue, respect and understanding among all religions. Its objective is to promote a culture of peace and harmony within multicultural Australia.


Considerations for schools

Schools should be sensitive to the beliefs and practices of different cultures, races and religions when determining uniform policy. Uniform policy needs to accommodate dress requirements of Sikh males and females particularly in relation to head coverings and the wearing of the Kara bracelet.

Dietary practices of Sikhs vary. Sikhs will not eat meat that has been ritually slaughtered such as halal or kosher. Many Sikhs are vegetarians and most will not eat beef. Providing a range of vegetarian foods in the school canteen and for other school activities is advised. Provide lists of ingredients where necessary.

Sikh celebrations and festivals, like those of other religions, should be acknowledged and respected.

In the classroom

Research Sikh holy places (takhts) and their significance.

Research the Golden Temple of Amritsar, its design, history and importance to Sikhs.

Investigate the meaning and significance of the Five Ks in the Sikh religion.

Have students identify places of significance in the history of Sikhism on a map and show with dates the movements of Sikhs across the world.

Set a history topic on the Sikh wars.
Investigate the observance of various celebrations of Sikhs throughout the lunar year. Investigate parallels with other cultures and religions.

What is similar in Sikh life cycle events to practices of other cultures and religions?

What is similar in Sikh beliefs, rituals and practices to other religions?

What is similar in the rhythm of the Sikh year to students’ own practices, or others they know of? In other words, what happens in their traditions every day, every week, every month or every year?

Compare the design, decoration and function of a Sikh *gurdwara* with a:

- Hindu *mandir* (temple)
- synagogue
- mosque
- cathedral
- church.

Organise a visit to a *gurdwara*.

Invite speakers from the Sikh community to talk about their religion, community organisations and activities. Have students prepare and discuss questions they would like to ask.

Investigate the symbols of Sikhism and their significance e.g. the sword, dagger and shield emblem

Compare rites of passage in Sikhism with those of other religions.

Have students read some of the children’s and young adult literature recommended in the Bibliography that is written by or about other cultural groups.

Discuss the issue of minority groups in a community and have students identify an experience in which they were a minority. A number of *The Really Big Beliefs Project: Classroom Activities* would be relevant to a discussion of this topic (http://www.asiaeducation.edu.au/bigbeliefsbook/activities.html).

Set a writing topic about being a minority in an imagined society.

Compare the “rules” of different religions. Discuss areas of commonality and difference. Use graphic organisers, e.g. Venn diagram, adapted from Lesson 6 in the *The Really Big Beliefs Project* (http://www.asiaeducation.edu.au/bigbeliefsbook/index.html).

Investigate the roles and rights of women in Sikhism. Compare the roles and rights of women in different religions.
Useful websites

Additional information about Sikhism can be found at:

- [The SikhNetwork](http://www.sikhnet.com/)
- [BBC Religion & Ethics: Sikhism](http://www.bbc.co.uk/religion/religions/sikhism/)
- [All About Sikhs](http://www.allaboutsikhs.com/)

Bibliography


- "Religion, Cultural Diversity and Safeguarding Australia"
- "Australian Muslims: their Beliefs, Practices and Institutions"
- "Constructing a Local Multifaith Network"

Department of Immigration and Multicultural and Indigenous Affairs (September 2003) *The People of Australia*.
