

Etiquette for a Sikh Funeral - Lastingpost.com

Introduction

The Sikh faith originated in the Punjab region of Northern India 500 years ago. Sikhs believe that there is only one God for all people including Sikhs and they regard all people as equal. They also believe that on death the soul moves from one body to the next, on a journey which will only end when the soul has become worthy to return to God, its creator.

Sikhs recognise the spiritual authority of the Guru Granth Sahib (the Sikh Holy Book) which conveys the Gurbani (the Word of God) through the teachings of the ten Gurus (Spiritual Teachers) who founded and established the Sikh religion. Sikhs believe that God continues to reveal himself through the scriptures. There are no priests and all Sikhs are of equal status in matters of religion.

There are now some 20 million Sikhs worldwide of whom about 500,000 live in the UK.

Prayer

Prayers and meditation are considered essential. Prayers are said three times a day, on rising, in the evening and at night before sleeping, whether alone, or at home as a family, or collectively elsewhere.

Places of Worship

Sikhs gather to worship in their Gurdwara (Sikh Holy Temple) where prayers are said five times a day. The Gurdwara is also a place for meditation, for the pursuit of religious knowledge and for seeking to learn God's will, in calm and quiet surroundings.

Sikhs may also set aside a room in their home for worship, and this room will be considered holy.

Life and Death

For Sikhs death is merely a stage in the progress of the soul in its journey to God, and it is held that there should be no mourning at the death of a Sikh.

All Sikhs hope that by living their lives according to God's will they will break the cycle of birth and death. Consequently the ceremonies commemorating a death involve many prayers to help the soul to be released from reincarnation and return to God.

When a Sikh dies the body must be cremated, and the ashes must either be buried or immersed in flowing water.

Preparation of the Body after Death

After death the body is bathed and dressed in clean clothes, and the five Sikh symbols including comb, knife and bracelet are placed with it, and prayers are said.

The Funeral Ceremony

A short ceremony is held at the funeral home before the cremation. Prayers are then said while the body is put on the bier or hearse, and hymns are sung while the hearse is taken to the cremation ground (or in the UK to the crematorium).

The Cremation

At the crematorium special prayers are said and hymns may be sung. In traditional ceremonies a member of the family will then light the funeral pyre (or at a crematorium press the button for the coffin to disappear). At this point the congregation will leave. Later the ashes will be collected and may be scattered in running water or in the sea, or buried where the cremation took place.

After the Cremation there may be another funeral service at the Gurdwara at which there will be readings from the Guru Granth Sahib and music, hymns and prayers.

Return to the Family Home

Finally the guests return to the family home where prayers are read and hymns are sung, and a substantial meal which has been prepared for the family by neighbours and friends is served. Afterwards everyone is expected to bathe, in order to cleanse themselves, on returning home.

Memorial Service

A memorial service may be held at a later date, either at the family home, or at the Gurdwara or elsewhere, especially if the cremation has taken place some distance away.

On the first anniversary of the death, the family will gather to remember the deceased and celebrate their life, and there will be prayers, followed by a meal.

Some Points on Etiquette

On entering a Gurdwara visitors should cover their heads and remove their shoes. If invited into the central place of worship, where the Guru Granth Sahib is displayed, visitors will be required to wash their hands before entering, and it will be appreciated if as a mark of respect they approach the Holy Book and bow.

Visitors to a Sikh home should offer to remove their shoes, and cover their heads. Sikhs are forbidden to touch alcohol, tobacco or any other intoxicants, and visitors

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to a Sikh temple or Sikh home should not bring these articles with them, apart from any necessary medication.

When meeting a group of Sikhs it is usual to greet the eldest first. When Sikhs meet each other they will put their hands together and bow, but there is no objection to shaking hands with non Sikhs. Sikh women are modest and they may feel more comfortable if spoken to by a man when other family members are present.

Flowers and Donations

There is no mention of flowers or donations in the Sikh funeral rites. Before making any arrangements it would be advisable to ascertain the wishes of the deceased and their family, which may have been made known in an announcement in the local or national newspapers, or which may have been communicated to close friends.

Modest Attire

All those attending a Sikh funeral should wear formal clothes in subdued colours. Men should wear hats and women are expected to wear hats or headscarves.

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