

## **Abstract**

The aim of this thesis is to discuss the place of visible Sikh religious symbols in Canadian public life, and their ensuing controversies. These will illustrate the complexity of resolving the issues of cultural and religious conflict in the Canadian multicultural society. The analysis of the lines of argument behind the chosen court decisions will be central for the purposes of this paper. The debate offers valuable insight into the political process of policy-making and accommodating diversity in Canada.

The Sikh articles of faith, commonly referred to as the “5Ks” are an indispensable part of life for the people practicing the Sikh religion. However, by applying these religious beliefs in their everyday life, the Sikh Canadians often find themselves in conflict with some of the Canadian laws and regulations. The most problematic articles are the *kesh* (unshorn hair covered at all times by a specific kind of turban or cloth) and the *kirpan* (a stylized representation of a sword, which must be enclosed in a protective covering and worn next to the body). These will be in the centre of focus of this thesis.

The thesis is divided into four main chapters. The first chapter will give the contextual framework of the thesis. Its basic notions will be introduced. The chapter will briefly overview the concept of multiculturalism, the core religious beliefs of Sikhism, the Sikh articles of faith, the history of this community in Canada and its place in the Canadian multicultural society. The Sikh community will be presented as an active group which has a major input in the public debate about Canadian multiculturalism and which contributes in the shaping the public view on religious freedom of visible minorities in Canada.

The second chapter will evolve around the controversy ensuing from the wearing of the *kesh* by practicing Sikh Canadians. This will be done by means of two major court cases that have shaped the public debate about this problem. The arguments used in these cases will be critically looked at and analyzed. The first case concerns the wearing of *kesh* while driving a motorcycle in Ontario. The second case concerns the struggle of the turban-wearing Sikhs to enter the Royal Canadian Mounted Police and the public debate concerning their demand to alter the traditional uniforms.

The third chapter concentrates on the *kirpan*. Even though the Sikhs insist that the kirpan is a mere symbolic article, its potential use as a weapon is often pointed out. To

illustrate this controversy, a court case which concerns the wearing of the *kirpan* in an educational institution has been chosen.

The closing chapter sums up the controversies. It presents their positive impact on the Canadian society as well as on the changing image of this often negatively viewed minority. It will conclude that the balancing of religious freedom in a multicultural society is a perpetual process with no definite resolution.