

## Beginners Guides: Nine religions and non-religious life stances

### The Bahá'í Faith

#### Origins

The Faith's Founder was Bahá'u'lláh(1817-1892), a Persian nobleman from Tehran who brought to humanity a stirring new message of peace and unity. The title Bahá'u'lláh means the Glory of God.

Like the founders of the other great world religions, Bahá'u'lláh faced intense persecution. He spent 40 years in prison and exile, culminating in incarceration in the city of Acre on the Mediterranean coast.

The Bahá'í Faith has two other central figures, the Báb and Abdul' Bahá.

#### Beliefs

Bahá'u'lláh claimed to be a new and independent Messenger from God. His life, work, and influence parallel that of Abraham, Krishna, Moses, Zoroaster, Buddha, Christ, and Muhammad. Bahá'ís view Bahá'u'lláh as the most recent in this succession of divine Messengers.

Unity is the central theme of Bahá'u'lláh's teachings. He taught that there is only one God, that the human race is one family, and that the world religions represent progressive stages in the revelation of God's will and purpose to humanity. In this day humanity has come of age. The time for global peace and unity has arrived, as foretold in the scriptures of all religions. Bahá'u'lláh wrote, "*The earth is but one country, and mankind its citizens.*"

#### Scriptures

Bahá'u'lláh wrote to the kings and rulers of the day, to leaders of religion and to individuals. If compiled these writings would be equivalent to 100 volumes. These, together with the writings of the Báb and Abdu'l- Bahá, form the scriptures of the Bahá'í Faith. Many are available in English.

Bahá'í scripture contains a wealth of teachings on the great spiritual themes that have always been central to religion: God the Creator, the Love of God, the soul, the life of the spirit, eternal life, the importance of prayer, service, the meaning of suffering and many more.

*"The purpose of God in creating man hath been, and will ever be, to enable him to know his Creator and to attain His Presence."*

Bahá'u'lláh

## The Bahá'í Faith Today

With more than five million followers, residing in virtually every nation on earth, the Bahá'í Faith is the second most widespread of the world religions after Christianity.<sup>1</sup> The Faith's scriptures and the activities of its membership address virtually every important trend in the world today, from new thinking about cultural diversity and environmental conservation to the decentralization of decision making; from a renewed commitment to family life and moral values to the call for social and economic justice in a world that is rapidly becoming a global neighbourhood.

### Significance of the Bahá'í Faith

Even teachers who do not have many Bahá'í pupils in their classes may wish to include the Bahá'í Faith for the following reasons:

#### 1 A unifying view of religion

The Bahá'í Faith offers a unifying view of religions. This is particularly significant at a time when the very diversity of religion and the conflicts between religious communities is being used as an argument against the existence of God.

The Bahá'í writings go into the subject of the unity of divine revelation in great depth. In the words of Bahá'u'lláh, "*This is the changeless Faith of God, eternal in the past, eternal in the future.*" When a person embraces the Bahá'í Faith they do not abandon their previous faith, but rather widen its basis.

#### 2 A global organisation with a unique structure

With no schisms or factions, the Bahá'í Faith comprises what is arguably the world's most diverse and widespread organization. It has no clergy, and is coordinated by a unique administrative system with freely elected governing councils in nearly 10,000 localities. The Universal House of Justice is the supreme governing body of the Bahá'í Faith. Its nine members are elected every five years. This system of administration is set out in the Bahá'í scriptures. The Bahá'í International Community works closely with the United Nations Organisation and has offices at the UNO in New York and Geneva.

**Acknowledgement:** Parts of this text were adapted from the Bahá'í International Community's website, [www.bahai.org](http://www.bahai.org).

#### Internet Links

[www.bahai.org](http://www.bahai.org)

[www.bahai-publishing-trust.co.uk](http://www.bahai-publishing-trust.co.uk)

## Buddhism

Buddhism was founded by an Indian prince – Siddattha Gotama – in the sixth century BCE. He became known as the Buddha, which means the enlightened one. A Buddha is not a god but someone who has awoken from the greed and suffering of ordinary life. A Buddha can help others to awaken. The Buddha is not worshipped or prayed to. He is honoured for his teachings and followed as an example.

Prince Siddattha was brought up in a palace, living the luxurious life of a royal. He was prevented from seeing suffering in any of its forms: old age, sickness or death. Eventually he secretly left the palace and saw all of these things. He became a wandering monk and tried to find the answer to human suffering. He became enlightened at the age of 35 after meditating under a Bodhi tree. He taught the 'Middle Way', the path which avoids all extremes, as neither extreme wealth nor extreme poverty had brought him enlightenment. He spent his remaining 40 years known as the Buddha, teaching his followers a way of life based on meditation, morality and giving.

### The Four Noble Truths

Buddha taught this in his first sermon.

**The First Noble Truth** is that suffering exists, no one ever experiences total satisfaction and nothing is permanent.

**The Second Noble Truth** states that the cause of suffering is not being satisfied, or constant desire. People are greedy and self-centred. It is because of this that they are reborn.

**The Third Noble Truth** is to remove desire by recognising and getting rid of feelings of greed and dissatisfaction. This puts an end to suffering.

**The Fourth Noble Truth** is that the path of enlightenment is open to all people and this is called the Noble Eightfold Path.

### The Noble Eightfold Path

Following the Eightfold Path provides a way of life that can lead to enlightenment and an end to suffering.

1. Right View – understand what you are doing with your life
2. Right Thought – give up worldly desires
3. Right Speech – speak in a positive way
4. Right Action – do not harm others
5. Right Livelihood – avoid taking jobs which harm other living creatures
6. Right Effort – practise meditation to change attitudes
7. Right Mindfulness – be completely aware of what you are doing all the time.
8. Right Concentration – concentrate on being at one with your situation

## **The Five Precepts**

The following is personal ethical guidance for Buddhists to follow which will help them on the Noble Eightfold Path.

1. Not harming any living beings – trying to show more loving kindness and concern for all life.
2. Not stealing – trying to be more generous in thoughts, words and deeds.
3. Not practising sexual misconduct – practising stillness, simplicity and contentment.
4. Not speaking cruelly or telling lies – trying to speak the truth and say kind and helpful things.
5. Not taking drink or drugs that stop you thinking clearly – trying to be aware of all your thoughts, words and deeds.

## **The Sangha**

This is the community of monks and nuns established by the Buddha. These communities focus on the Dhamma, the teachings of the Buddha, and live according to an elaborate set of rules. They rely on the lay community to provide them with food and clothing. Most Buddhists do not become monks or nuns but follow Buddhism whilst continuing their ordinary lives.

## **Devotion**

Whilst some Buddhists chose to meditate at a temple many others perform their meditation and devotions at home in their own shrines.

## **Enlightenment**

Buddhists live their lives believing in the enlightenment. By following the teaching of the Buddha, Buddhists are attempting to attain enlightenment. It is only at this point that they can break the cycle of rebirth, a state which is known as Nirvana.

## Christianity

Christianity began in approximately 33 CE. It was started by the followers of Jesus. At the centre of Christianity is the belief that Jesus is the Son of God. The basic beliefs of a Christian can be summed up in the creeds. The two main creeds in Christianity are the Apostles' Creed and the Nicene Creed.

### The Apostles' Creed

'I believe in God the Father almighty,  
Creator of heaven and earth.  
I believe in Jesus Christ, his only Son, our Lord.  
He was conceived by the power of the Holy Spirit and born of the Virgin Mary.  
He suffered under Pontius Pilate,  
Was crucified, died and was buried.  
He descended to the dead.  
On the third day he rose again.  
He ascended to heaven, and is seated at the right hand of the Father.  
He will come again to judge the living and the dead.  
I believe in the Holy Spirit,  
The holy catholic church,  
The communion of saints,  
The forgiveness of sins,  
The resurrection of the body,  
And the life everlasting.  
Amen.'

### The Trinity

Christianity is a monotheistic religion which teaches that God has three ways of being. These are the Father, Jesus the incarnate and the Holy Spirit working in the world. The Trinity is one God working in three different ways.

### Jesus Christ

Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Palestine to a woman called Mary, who the Bible says was a virgin. The Bible also tells of the visitors at his birth: angels, shepherds and wise men. He grew up in Nazareth and at the age of about 30 became a preacher, healer and teacher. He was baptised and the Bible tells of his temptation by Satan in the wilderness. Jesus recruited a group of followers called the disciples. The Bible describes Jesus telling parables and performing healings and miracles. He taught that the greatest commandment was to 'love God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength'. The second greatest commandment was to 'love your neighbour as yourself'. At the age of 33 Jesus was crucified by the Roman rulers. Christians believe that three days later he was resurrected. The Bible tells of many sightings of Jesus after he died and before he went to be with his Father in Heaven. Christians believe that because Jesus died, their sins are forgiven and that if they believe in Jesus as the Son of God they will enter Heaven when they die.

## **The Bible**

The Christian holy book, or Bible, contains within it many writings or books.

It is divided into the Old Testament – made up of the Jewish scriptures, writings before the time of Jesus, and the New Testament – writings which are concerned with the life of Jesus and his apostles.

The Old Testament was originally written in Hebrew and consists of 39 books. The books include laws, prophecy, psalms, poetry, history and stories. There are 27 books in the New Testament, originally written in Greek. These books contain history, prophecy, gospels and letters.

All Christians consider the Bible a source of teaching and authority but there are different views on whether it is literal truth, a spiritual truth or an exploration of meaning.

## **Worship**

Christians see themselves as a body of believers. It is the community rather than the building they meet in which is of principal importance. Christians meet regularly on a Sunday but during the week there are many other informal prayer meetings and groups that get together to study the Bible or discuss how best to live a Christian life.

Most Christian churches celebrate the death and resurrection of Jesus by sharing bread and wine. This has many different names such as Communion, Eucharist or Mass. Many services also include praying, praising of God through singing, listening to the Bible and learning about its meaning.

Praying and reading the Bible are not activities confined to Sundays. Many Christians pray and read the Bible every day. The prayers they offer individually and in communal worship include praise of God, confession, thanksgiving and asking for help and guidance from God.

## **Denominations**

The Christian Church is divided into many different groups commonly known as denominations. There are some different beliefs and ways of worshipping between the denominations but they all hold some central beliefs. These are a belief in the Trinity and the resurrection, that Christians should live their lives in a way that shows a love of God, and that when they die they will go to be with God.

The denominations can be organised into three groups:

- The Orthodox Church;
- The Roman Catholic Church;
- The Protestant Churches.

## **Festivals**

The most important festivals for Christians are Christmas, Easter and Pentecost.

At Christmas, Christians commemorate the birth of Jesus Christ. The period beginning four Sundays before Christmas, and leading up to Christmas, is called Advent, which means 'coming'.

Easter is the time when Christians remember the death and resurrection of Jesus. The 40 days leading up to this are called Lent, when Christians spend time praying and considering the importance of the events at Easter. Holy week includes Maundy Thursday (when the Last Supper is commemorated), Good Friday, the crucifixion of Jesus, and Easter Sunday where the joy of the resurrection is celebrated.

Pentecost is the time when the Holy Spirit came upon the disciples and Jesus finally ascended into Heaven.

## The Hindu religious tradition

The Hindu tradition has no one founder or formal creedal statement. It dates back to around 1800 BCE. The word Hindu comes from a Persian form of the ancient Sanskrit word 'Sindhu', which was used to describe the river Indus. The term Hinduism is used to describe the ancient religion of India. Those who practise the Hindu religious tradition often call it the Sanatan Dharma, or the eternal way. The Hindu religious tradition is complex; some people describe it as being like the roots of the Banyan tree.

The Hindu religious tradition is extremely diverse, depending on things such as culture, family background and geographical location.

### Hindu ideas about God

Brahman is the name given to the ultimate life force. Many Hindus would say there are many gods and goddesses but only one God and that is Brahman. The most important deities are the Trimurti which represents the three aspects of God. These are Brahma – the creator, Vishnu – the preserver and Shiva – the destroyer.

Hindu families will devote themselves to one or two particular gods or goddesses as a way of coming to God. Some people devote themselves to the human forms of the god Vishnu, known as Avatars. Vishnu is believed to have come to Earth in human and animal form for example as Rama and Krishna.

### Sacred text

Hindu scriptures are of two types: Shruti and Smriti. Shruti means that which is heard, Smriti means that which is remembered.

Shruti are also called revealed truths. These are scriptures which Hindus believe were revealed by God to holy men, who interpreted them for people to aid their spiritual development. One example of these is the Vedas which were written in Sanskrit. One part of the Vedas is known as the Upanishads which includes discussion between holy men and their students.

As these texts were hard to understand, Hindu teachers wrote Smritis, which are also called remembered truths. Many of these are stories, often in the form of poems. The stories tell of the Trimurti and talk about the right way to behave. They explain the beliefs and values of the Hindu way of living. An example of these is the Ramayana which tells the story of Rama and Sita, and the Mahabharata, the most celebrated part of which is the Bhagavad Gita. The Bhagavad Gita tells the story of Arjuna and his charioteer Krishna. The Bhagavad Gita is the most loved and well known of the scriptures and for many Hindus the one they are most likely to possess and be familiar with.

### Worship

For most Hindus, worship is a private thing and there is an emphasis on worship in the home. Even worship in the mandir, or temple, has some individual elements as well as communal aspects. Many Hindu homes will have a room or a corner of a room set aside for a shrine before which puja, or worship, will be performed. In the mandir in this country there will be several shrines to different gods and goddesses whereas in India each mandir is often devoted to one deity. Communal worship at the mandir usually takes place twice a day.

## **Dharma**

Dharma is fulfilling the duties of a Hindu, both those that are religious and those that relate to the extended family. There are many important duties such as looking after your dependants, avoiding arguments, ahimsa (respect for life) and worshipping.

## **Karma**

Karma is the law of cause and effect. This is the idea that every action has a positive or negative effect. Karma is the sum of everything that an individual does: good and bad.

## **Samsara**

Many Hindus have a belief in the cycle of reincarnation known as Samsara. If they lead a good life and fulfil their duties their next life will be better than their present one. If they lead a bad life and do not fulfil their duties they will be reborn into a life less comfortable. Eventually Hindus hope they will be able to step off the wheel and achieve Moksha, spiritual freedom, when the soul or Atman is no longer reborn.

## **Festivals**

There are many festivals and special times which draw together family and community. There are some large community celebrations such as those for Diwali. Some other important festivals are Navaratri, Holi, Shivaratri and Raksha Bandan.

## **Samskaras**

There are four stages of Hindu life: student, householder, retirement and renunciation. The various samskaras, or ritual steps, are sacraments designed to initiate a new stage of life. Not all of these are carried out by all Hindus. Instead it depends on the caste that each person belongs to. There are different ritual steps based around birth and naming, the sacred thread ceremony, marriage and death. For example, the sacred thread ceremony happens at the beginning of the student stage when a boy is aged seven or above. Within the ceremony a boy is given a thread of cotton with three strands on it. He must wear this and make vows of commitment promising to worship God, to respect holy men and their writing, to honour parents, elders and ancestors and to do his duty to the poor and all living things.

## Islam

The word Islam means submission or peace. Muhammad (pbuh) was born in the city of Makkah in 570 CE. Muhammad (pbuh) is not seen as the founder of Islam but rather as the final Prophet, the first of whom was Adam (pbuh). There are many other prophets mentioned in the Qur'an including Ibrahim (pbuh) (Abraham), Musa (pbuh) (Moses) and Isa (pbuh) (Jesus). Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) is known as the seal of the prophets.

Muhammad was a trader happily married to his wife, Khadija. At the age of 40 he began experiencing a series of revelations from God. These revelations were delivered by the Angel Jibril or Gabriel over a number of years and form the sacred text of the Qur'an.. The Quranic text was written down, during the life of the Prophet, although it was compiled as one volume only after his death The words are regarded as a direct transmission from God Himself. Allah is the Arabic name for God

Prophet Muhammad and his followers were persecuted in Makkah and eventually migrated to Madinah in 622 CE. This was known as the Hijrah. By the time of the Prophet's death in 632 CE, Islam was an established religion in the Arabian peninsula.

### The Qur'an and Hadith

The Qur'an was revealed to the Prophet Muhammad over a 23-year period. Muslims show their love and obedience to God by being obedient to the words in the Qur'an and living as closely as possible to the way the Prophet (pbuh) lived. The Qur'an gives guidance on a range of topics about everyday life, ethical, spiritual, social and moral issues. It is treated with reverence, being handled carefully, and ideally read on a daily basis. Children will often learn to read Arabic and recite the Qur'an at an early age.

The Hadith are a collection of the sayings and actions of the Prophet Muhammad (pbuh). The word Sunnah means 'Way (of the Prophet)', and is the life example of the Prophet as reported in the Hadith.

Whereas the Qur'an is seen as the word of God, the Hadith are classified according to various levels of authenticity.

### Tawhid

Islam is a monotheistic religion. The concept of Tawhid is the oneness of God. God is more important than everything. God cannot be represented pictorially.. The different attributes of God are shown in his 99 beautiful names such as Al-Rahim the most merciful and Al-Hafeez the protector of the weak.

The belief in one God is at the centre of the declaration of faith – the Shahadah.

### The Five Pillars of Islam

These provide a structure and a focus for Muslim daily life and worship. Muslims express and uphold their faith by practising these pillars.

### The Shahadah (The declaration of faith)

'There is no god but the One God and Muhammad is the Messenger of God.'

Belief in the oneness of God is the foundation of Islam. The words of the Shahadah form part of the words of the Adhan, which are the first words whispered into the ear of a newborn baby and are also the last words a Muslim will hope to hear before s/he dies.

## **Salah (Prayer)**

The ritual prayers (salah – also referred to as namaz), are offered five times a day. All Muslims are required to pray from the age of about 12. Prayer enables one to develop a closer relationship with God. Prayers are said at specific times of day, (once early in the morning, once in the night and the others dispersed through the day) , the times will alter slightly depending on the time of year. At the mosque, Muslims pray in rows behind the Imam, the leader of congregational prayers.. Prayer can be carried out anywhere that is clean. Often a prayer mat is used to pray on, but as long as a space is clean it is not essential to use one. Muslims will have to have made Wudhu (ablution), before they pray, so access to water is useful. Muslims face Makkah (towards South East in the UK) when they pray.

## **Sawm (Fasting)**

Many Muslims fast at various times of the year, but the month of Ramadan (the 9<sup>th</sup> month in the Islamic calendar) has special religious significance. In this month every adult Muslim fasts from dawn until sunset. Fasting involves refraining from eating, drinking, smoking (and other bad habits) and sexual relations. Ramadan is an opportunity to increase one's God consciousness 'taqwa', it is regarded as a time of spiritual discipline that contributes to spiritual growth. There is also a sense of identifying with the poor, and encouraging Muslims to give to the weak and needy. There are exemptions to fasting, for example, for pregnant women, the sick and the elderly, but they must try and make up the time at a later date.

## **Zakah (Almsgiving)**

All Muslims must annually give 2.5 per cent of their savings. This is distributed among the poor and needy.

## **Hajj (Pilgrimage to Makkah)**

Pilgrimage to Makkah is an obligatory act of worship for those who can afford it and are physically able. All Muslims should try to complete the Hajj once in their lifetime. The pilgrimage takes place in the last month of the Islamic calendar Dhul-Hijjah. During the Pilgrimage, Muslims are required to dress simply, focus on worshipping God and be careful not to argue or lose their temper. This is called being in 'Ihram'. As everyone, rich and poor, black and white, are required to dress in the same way and perform the same rituals, Hajj symbolises simplicity, equality, the cosmopolitan nature of the world in one place, and the unity of humanity.

## **Festivals**

Two very important festivals are Id-ul-Fitr and Id-ul-Adha.

Id-ul-Fitr celebrates the end of the fast of Ramadan. This is a time to ask for forgiveness, thank God for everything He has blessed one with and share in congregational prayers. Special food is prepared and shared with family and friends. Presents are given and new clothes are often bought. This is also a time when Muslims will visit the cemetery and remember dead family and friends.

Id-ul-Adha celebrates the devotion shown to God by his Prophet Abraham (pbuh) to sacrifice his son Isma'il (pbuh). God ordered that a lamb was sacrificed instead of Isma'il and so this festival is about devotion to God. In keeping with this practice of Abraham, animals are sacrificed and distributed to family, neighbours, and the poor, or money is given to charities who will ensure a sacrifice is made and given to the poor on your behalf.

## Non religious ethical life stances

RE is for pupils who do not identify with a faith tradition as much as for those with a faith background. RE therefore needs to consider appropriate alternative belief systems to religion which exist in modern Britain. It is not only religions that regard ethics as central to life, there are many philosophies that encourage their followers to live life mindful of others needs. These different philosophies can be grouped under the title of non religious ethical life stances including a broad range of ideologies including Humanism, agnosticism and atheism.

### Humanism

Humanists believe that human nature is remarkable but not created by god or any other divine being. People must rely on humanity not god to support them in life thus human reason, goodwill and science are the key to dealing with life's issues and dilemmas. Humanists value justice, freedom and happiness as positive values and aims in life. Humanists do not refer to religious texts or authorities when making moral decisions but to their own reason.

Humanists believe it is a reasoned sense of goodness that should support decision making of the right path to follow for individuals and other people. When considering ethics and ethical decisions humanists believe we should look at individual cases, considering carefully the individual situation and the effect of possible choices on the well being of people animal, the environment and the wider community. When making ethical decisions humanists try to follow the golden rule - treat other people as you would like them to treat you.

Humanists believe we should enjoy the positive things in life if it is possible to do that without harming the environment or other people. Humanists believe it is important to make responsible choices. Humanists believe in active citizenship and will often be found campaigning against something they have decided is unjust.

Secular ceremonies for weddings, baby welcoming and funerals, are popular for humanists and others who want to celebrate or mark these significant life events without using religious texts, buildings or leaders. There are generally local celebrants and the British Humanist Association provides texts to support these ceremonies.

### In the classroom

[www.humanismforschools.org.uk](http://www.humanismforschools.org.uk)

Humanism and non religious ethical life stances will be referred to in many units of work as you will be bringing in the experience of the pupils in your class as well as reflecting the beliefs of the community. A more formal study of Humanism might include reference to beliefs and values, finding out about humanist ceremonies and ethical activities and for older pupils learning about contemporary humanist figures.

## Jainism

Jainism has its historical roots in the Hindu religious tradition. There is no single founder of Jainism. The person who gave Jainism its modern form was Mahavira 599-527BC, others think he was a closer contemporary of the Buddha.

Jains believe that the universe and everything in it is eternal. Nothing has been created or will be destroyed. They believe that the universe is made from three realms, the heavens, the earthly realm and the realms of hell.

The heavenly realm is the place where the perfect universal presence as well as multiple other deities dwell.

For Jains the purpose of life is to achieve moksha- liberation, having ridded oneself of karma that obstructs the soul. The term Karma is used as it is in the Hindu religious tradition to mean the sum of everything that an individual does: good and bad.

Jainism recognises a line of 24 Tirthankara, teachers. These 'fordmakers' are humans who are born into each age to support the monks, nuns and laity achieve liberation from the constant cycle of Moksha. Each teacher achieves enlightenment and then teaches others to achieve this. The 24th Tirthankara was Mahavira. He was born into the warrior class, however he chose to renounce the world at 30. After thirteen years of asceticism he found enlightenment and is later said to have fasted to death.

### Beliefs

All Jains take and follow five great vows, followed more strictly by monks and nuns and less strictly by the laity. These are, ahimsa- non violence, satya- truth, asetya- non stealing, brahmachanga- celibacy or sexual restraint and aparigraha- non possessiveness. Monks and nuns follow these vows extremely strictly, they are generally homeless, wear simple clothes or none at all, shave their heads and receive food donated to them.

Ahimsa nonviolence- Jains extend this to all living beings, for Jains this includes soil, sand oceans, fires, insects, microbes and plants. Many Jains are not only vegetarian but fruitarian- eating only fruit, nuts and milk. Some monks and nuns whisk a chair before sitting to avoid sitting on insects.

Jains are strict vegetarians.

Dharma, Karma, Moksha and reincarnation are key beliefs similar to ideas in the Hindu religious tradition. For Jains the path to dharma is strict asceticism.

Jains do not believe in god in the same way as some other faiths they believe in divine or perfect beings, these beings are believed to be worthy of devotion by Jains.

### Worship and practice

Worship takes place at home or in stone temples. The Jain temple in Leicester was the first to be built in Europe opening to worshippers in 1988. It is a beautiful ornate building used by both Jain sects.

Jains will aim to pray daily, show respect to those following a monastic life, meditate by chanting mantras and perform puja to the images of the tirthankara

Useful website: [www.jainology.org](http://www.jainology.org)

## Judaism

Judaism is the oldest of the three monotheistic religions and its origins are in the time of the Patriarchs: Abraham, his son Isaac and his son Jacob. The name Judaism is derived from Judah, one of the 12 sons of Jacob.

There are three particularly important features in Judaism:

- belief in one God;
- the Torah;
- the community and their land.

### Belief in one God

Jews believe in a creator God who made humans in the image of himself. They believe that we cannot know what God looks like and so no visual representation of God will be found in synagogues or homes. Many Jewish people believe the name of God is too sacred to pronounce.

The words of the Shema are at the centre of Jewish belief. The opening of the Shema is,

'Hear O Israel, the Lord our God is one. Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul and with all your strength.'

### The Torah

The contents of the Torah is at the centre of Judaism as it embodies the covenant that Jewish people made with God in which God promised to give the land of Canaan to Abraham and look after his descendants. The teaching in the Torah, which means instruction, contains 613 commandments. The most well known of these are the Ten Commandments, which were given to Moses.

Jews have other important teachings which together make up the Tenakh or written Torah. These are:

- Torah – five books of Moses;
- Nevi'im – the books of the Prophets;
- Ketuvim – the holy writings.

The initials of each of these, T, N, K, make up the word Tenakh.

Also important is the Talmud which is known as the oral law.

The Torah is written in Hebrew, and in Orthodox synagogues it is read in Hebrew. The Torah is written on a set of parchment scrolls by a qualified scribe. Scrolls are treated with respect and are dressed in various items before being placed in the Ark of the Covenant in the synagogue. A Torah scroll is covered with a mantle, it has a silver breast plate, a yad or pointer is used when reading the scrolls, and bells or crowns are placed on the wooden rollers. The Ark is situated so that worshippers look towards the holy city of Jerusalem when they are facing it. It takes one year to complete a reading of the Torah and the festival of Simchat Torah celebrates the completion of this annual reading. This festival is full of joy with Torah scrolls processed or danced around the synagogue.

### The community and their land

The Jewish identity is very important and at times this has been a challenge as Jews have faced oppression. The land of Israel is a holy site for Jews, wherever they live in the world. Jews believe it was promised to them by God through the promise to Abraham and his descendants. There are many sites of pilgrimage in Jerusalem, the

most important of which is the Western Wall, which formed part of the second temple in Jerusalem.

The family and the wider Jewish community are essential to living a Jewish life. The Kashrut or Jewish food laws play an important part in the daily lives of Jews, reminding them of their covenant with God. Foods which are fit to be eaten are called kosher. Food which is unfit to be eaten is called treyfah. In order to be kosher only certain types of meat and fish can be eaten and they must be killed in a special way. Meat and dairy products must not be eaten at the same meal and separate kitchen utensils and crockery are used for these different types of food. Several hours must elapse between the eating of a meat meal and a dairy meal.

Many Jewish festivals are based around the home as much as the synagogue, showing the importance of the family in Judaism. Each week the Shabbat meal is celebrated at home on a Friday evening. This is followed by a day of rest with the family and a time to worship God.

### **Festivals**

Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur are two important festivals. Rosh Hashanah is the Jewish New Year, which is celebrated in September or October. It is a time for thinking about the achievements of the past year and considering plans for the next year. Yom Kippur is the Day of Atonement. It begins at sunset, ten days after Rosh Hashanah. Many Jews fast for 25 hours. It is vital for Jews to forgive one another for anything they have done wrong before the beginning of Yom Kippur. There are many other festivals, including Pesach (Passover) and Hanukkah (festival of lights).

## Sikhism

Central to Sikhism is a belief in one God. God is described by Sikhs as Truth, Eternal and Creator. These beliefs are reflected in the Mool Mantar, an important part of the Sikh holy book which is regularly used in worship.

Sikhs believe in equality, which is essential for ethical decision making. All people are equal, whether male or female, Sikh or follower of a different belief system. Sikhs show their belief in equality in many ways, for example, anyone can eat in the langar, the free kitchen provided after every service in the gurdwara. Guru Gobind Singh, the tenth Guru, said that there is no difference between a temple and a mosque, or between the prayers of a Hindu and those of a Muslim.

The concept of service, sewa, is essential to Sikhs. There are many different types of service: manual service, such as preparing and serving food in the langar, or cleaning the shoes of the worshippers; or charitable service, such as giving money or goods to charity; or intellectual service, such as teaching children about Sikhism or showing adults around the gurdwara.

Sikhs should take part in honest work. This is work that is needed for the good of both the family and the wider community. Work should not exploit others. This links with the ideas of equality and the idea of generosity of possessions and time.

### **The Mool Mantar (an interpretation in English)**

‘There is one God

Truth by name

Maker of all things

Fearing nothing and at enmity with nothing

Timeless is his image

Not subject to the circle of birth and death

Self existent

By the grace of the Gurus

Made known to men.’

### **The Sikh Gurus**

Guru Nanak was the first of the Sikh Gurus, born in 1469, and it was his teachings that were the beginnings of the Sikh religion. There have been ten Gurus, who Sikhs believe conveyed God’s word to their age.

#### **Guru Nanak (1469 to 1539)**

With a few disciples, he devoted himself to meditation on the name of God and writing hymns to help believers reach out to God. He travelled widely, teaching through the words he had written. He shaped the Mool Mantar.

#### **Guru Angad (1504 to 1574)**

Created the script in which the scriptures are written.

#### **Guru Amar Das (1534 to 1581)**

He taught the practice of the sharing of a common meal in the langar.

#### **Guru Ram Das (1534 to 1581)**

Founded the city of Amritsar and built a shrine which has now grown into the Golden Temple.

#### **Guru Arjan (1563 to 1606)**

He collected together the hymns of the first four Gurus, which became the Adi Granth, the first part of the Guru Granth Sahib. He was the first Guru martyr when he was killed by Emperor Jehangir.

### **Guru Har Gobind (1595 to 1644)**

He taught Sikhs to stand up against oppression and injustice and instituted the Nishan Sahib.

### **Guru Hari Rai (1630 to 1661)**

### **Guru Har Krishan (1656 to 1664)**

### **Guru Tegh Bahadar (1621 to 1675)**

He was killed for sharing his belief that everyone should be free to worship God in any way that they choose.

### **Guru Gobind Singh (1666 to 1708)**

He created the Khalsa in April 1699 at the festival of Baisakhi. He said that after him there would be no more human Gurus and that from then on the Guru Granth Sahib was the place to look for spiritual guidance.

## **The Guru Granth Sahib**

This is the sacred book and is a guide for Sikhs now that there are no more living Gurus. It is a collection of hymns and words of the Gurus. It is considered to be the last Guru and so is treated carefully with respect and honour. It is held high above the head when it is moved and put on a bed in its own special room at night. When it is being used in worship it is positioned higher than the worshippers. A book of extracts from the holy book is called a Gutka and many Sikhs find this easier to keep at home than a full Guru Granth Sahib.

## **The Gurdwara**

This means house of the Guru and is the place where the Guru Granth Sahib is housed and is also a place of worship. The Nishan Sahib, the Sikh flag, is flown, declaring freedom of worship and the availability of hospitality. It is also the focus of life for the Sikh community where religious teaching takes place and many other community activities.

## **The Five Ks**

In 1699 Guru Gobind Singh instituted the Khalsa, a group of committed Sikhs. To show their commitment they were to wear a number of symbols: the five Ks.

1. Kesh – Uncut hair. A man will cover his uncut hair with a turban.
2. Kangha – A small comb which keeps the hair in place.
3. Kara – A steel bracelet which is worn on the right wrist. It is a symbol of the oneness of God.
4. Kachera – Shorts which are worn under clothes to symbolise action. In the Punjab they would have allowed for freedom of movement and modesty.
5. Kirpan – A sword which a Sikh should always carry to symbolise the readiness to defend the faith or use against oppression.

Sikhs who join the Khalsa take part in an initiation ceremony called the Amrit ceremony. Joining the Khalsa means someone making promises that require a high level of commitment to the faith and in their own personal life.

## Festivals

There are two different types of festivals. Gurpurbs are holy days related to the life of a Guru, such as the birthday of Guru Nanak. Melas are days that coincide with a Hindu festival but are also significant because of something that happened during the life of one of the Gurus, for example Divali when Guru Har Gobind was freed from prison having negotiated the release of all the other prisoners.

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<sup>i</sup> 1992 Encyclopaedia Britannica Book of the Year. ....