

TEACHER'S NOTES

RELIGION

FAST FACTS

THE BAHÁ'Í FAITH

PEOPLE

Many people at first believed the Bahá'í faith to be just a sect of Islam, but over the years it has established its independence. In some places however, notably Iran, there has been considerable tension between Bahá'ís and Muslims. Because it is a relatively young religious movement there was initial uncertainty among scholars as to how to regard the faith, but now it has begun to be acknowledged as a significant world religion.

BELIEFS

In May 1844 (the year in which Bahá'ís believe their faith to have been founded) a Persian called *Siyyid Alí Muhammad* (1819-1850) declared himself to be the Mahdi, the "hidden imam" of Shi'a Islam. He took the title of **the Báb**, which means 'the Gate', and declared that he was preparing the way for another messenger of God. He gained many followers (known at first as *Bábís*) but his teachings were severely condemned by the religious (Shi'a) authorities. He was imprisoned and in 1850 was executed.

A few years later *Mirza Husayn* (1817-1892) declared himself to be the fulfilment of the Báb's prophecy – the **Bahá'u'lláh**, a title meaning the Glory of God. After being exiled several times he spent his final years in Israel where his remains were buried near Mount Carmel.

The teachings of Bahá'u'lláh include the following:

- the oneness of the world's religions
- the oneness of humanity
- science and religion are fully compatible
- men and women are equal
- the responsibility of people to seek for truth.

Bahá'ís believe that the Great Manifestations of God, the great prophets, have revealed the word of God to humanity. They are up to the present: Abraham, Moses, Krishna, Zoroaster, Buddha, Jesus, Mohammad, the Báb and Bahá'u'lláh.

COMMUNITIES

In the 1990s it was reckoned that the faith was established in well over 200 countries. Particularly large communities of Bahá'ís can be found in India, Iran, South America and Southeast Asia. The faith is also the fastest-growing of the independent world religions, having grown at an average rate of 3.63% per year between 1970 and 1985 (according to the *World Christian Encyclopaedia*).

There is some evidence of splits in the Bahá'í movement dating back to the time of the guardianship of Bahá'u'lláh's great-grandson, Shoghi Effendi (1897-1957) and the refusal of some Bahá'ís to accept his authority and leadership.

PLACES OF WORSHIP

Every 19 days the community meets for worship, discussion and the sharing of food together – known as the Nineteen Day Feast.

One of the best-known of the Bahá'í houses of worship, and the first to be built in the West (1953), is at Wilmette in Illinois, just outside Chicago. Other houses of worship can be found in Kampala (Uganda), near Sydney (Australia), near Frankfurt (Germany), Panama City, Apia (Western Samoa) and New Delhi (India).

In each country there is a democratically elected National Spiritual Assembly, and each local community is governed by its own Spiritual Assembly.

The international governing body of the Bahá'í faith is the *Universal House of Justice*, which is based on Mount Carmel (close to the burial place of Bahá'u'lláh) at Haifa, Israel.

FESTIVALS

During the 19 days prior to Naw-Ruz (2 March to 20 March) Bahá'ís observe the Fast, refraining from eating and drinking during the hours of daylight. It is a time for deep reflection on one's spiritual state. Exemptions are permitted for those who are ill, the under-15s and over-70s, and for pregnant and nursing women.

Other special days in the Bahá'í faith include:

The Declaration of the Báb	23 May
The Martyrdom of the Báb	9 July
The Birth of the Báb	20 October
The Birth of Bahá'u'lláh	12 November

SCRIPTURES

During the last years of his life Bahá'u'lláh devoted much time to writing and these writings are regarded as revelations from God. Many of these writings were translated into English by Bahá'u'lláh's great-grandson, Shoghi Effendi, who had been educated at Oxford. He used a slightly archaic English style, reflecting the style of the King James Version of the Christian bible which was most familiar at the time. His translations into English, rather than the Persian originals, have been the basis for translations into other Western languages.

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BUDDHISM

PEOPLE

Siddhartha Gautama was born a prince, the son of a ruler of a small kingdom in northern India, at Kapilavastu in the Himalayan foothills around 560 BCE. At the age of 29 he left his wealthy privileged life to seek an answer to the problem of human suffering, wandering around as a beggar. He tried fasting and meditation, but rejected extreme solutions. According to the famous tradition Siddhartha sat down in the shade of a banyan tree and after a night of meditation he began to understand the meaning of things and became enlightened, achieving nirvana. Sculptures of the Buddha, as he became known, often show him seated in meditation recalling the occasion under the banyan tree. The Buddha died at the age of 80 having influenced many by his teachings and sermons.

After the Buddha's death the new teachings spread first through northern India and over the following centuries were carried north into central Asia, southwards towards Sri Lanka and South East Asia and eastwards towards China and Japan.

Some Buddhists, especially of the Tibetan tradition, refer to Siddhartha Gautama as the Buddha Shakyamuni, which means "the sage of the Sakya clan" (denoting the area of Nepal where the Buddha was born).

A familiar symbol of Buddhism is the **eight-spoked wheel** which reminds people of the eightfold path of the Buddha's teaching. Another common symbol is the **lotus flower**. The roots of the lotus are in the mud at the bottom of the pond, which represents human life, while the flower itself represents enlightenment.

BELIEFS

Buddhists believe in birth and rebirth and the "cause and effect" of karma (actions). Every action has an effect and people's actions tie them to the cycle of birth and rebirth – a process of endless suffering. Buddhists seek to be free from this cycle by understanding and acting on the teaching of the Buddha. These teachings are summed up by the Three Universal Truths, the Four Noble Truths and the Eightfold Path, which together are known as the **Dharma**.

The Three Universal Truths:

1. Everything is impermanent and changing
2. Impermanence leads to suffering, making life imperfect
3. The self is not personal and unchanging.

The Four Noble Truths:

1. All life involves suffering (the Truth of Suffering)
2. Suffering is caused by desire and attachment (the Origin of Suffering)
3. Desire and attachment can be overcome (the Truth of Cessation)
4. The way to overcome them is by the Eightfold Path (the Truth of the Path).

The Eightfold Path:

The Eightfold Path is eight ways of behaving and each way has to be followed because they depend on each other. They relate to wisdom, morality and meditation.

1. Right seeing and understanding – e.g. the Noble Truths
2. Right thought or intention – e.g. acting considerately
3. Right speech – e.g. avoiding lies or gossip; saying what you mean
4. Right action – e.g. honesty and not harming living things
5. Right work or livelihood – e.g. avoiding jobs that harm other beings
6. Right effort – e.g. seeking to overcome desire, selfishness and attachment
7. Right mindfulness – e.g. thinking before acting; meditation
8. Right concentration – e.g. freeing the mind of distractions before meditation

Buddhists sometimes speak of their most precious beliefs as The Three Jewels – belief in the Buddha, the Dharma and the community (or monastic order) of the sangha.

COMMUNITIES

In the period after the Buddha's death divisions arose leading to the development of two main schools of Buddhist thought – the **Mahayana** tradition (most commonly found to the north and east of India) and the **Theravada** tradition (found mainly in southern and south eastern Asia).

Theravada Buddhists ('the Way of the Elders') believe that the Buddha was a perfect model to imitate but only human. They do not pray to the Buddha because he can no longer help people alive now. Followers of the Theravada tradition believe that people must follow the teachings written in the Tipitaka scriptures in order to enter into nirvana. This tradition gives more emphasis to the role of monks and nuns and in some countries it is customary for boys to spend some time living as monks.

Mahayana Buddhists ('the Great Vehicle') believe that Siddhartha was not the only Buddha – others had come before him and there will be others yet to come. They believe in the **bodhisattva** ('enlightened essence') – one who delays entry into nirvana in order to help others to gain enlightenment. Mahayana Buddhists use the Tipitaka scriptures and other more recent writings called sutras – such as the Diamond Sutra and the Lotus Sutra. Not everyone needs to become a monk in Mahayana tradition and people can seek nirvana without abandoning life in society. In adapting to different cultures Mahayana Buddhism has given rise to distinct branches – Vajrayana or Tibetan Buddhism (led by the exiled Dalai Lama); the Chinese Pure Land tradition centred around the compassionate Amida Buddha; and Japanese Zen Buddhism, which is very popular in the West, emphasising meditation as the way to enlightenment.

Both main traditions have a presence in Ireland and there is a Tibetan Buddhist centre in Co. Cavan which serves as a focal point for Irish Buddhists.

PLACES OF WORSHIP

Some Buddhist temples are on a grand scale and very ornate, while others may be simple rooms set aside for worship.

The rituals performed at a shrine or temple vary considerably according to the tradition of Buddhism to which it belongs and the culture of the country where it is found. The offerings – of flowers, candles, incense – are a mark of respect. Flowers symbolise the shortness of life; candles symbolise enlightenment; incense represents the spread of the Dharma. As a sign of respect and thankfulness for the Buddha's teaching a Buddhist may prostrate himself or herself

in front of the statue of the Buddha.

Prayer for most Buddhists is not directed to a god but is a way of getting one's thoughts in tune with the teachings of the Buddha. Prayers are often in short repeated phrases (mantras) and some Buddhists write the mantras onto a scroll which is placed in a spinning prayer wheel. The spinning of the wheel represents the repeating of the mantras and their release into the world.

A community of Buddhist monks or nuns is called a **sangha**. The members of the sangha spend their time studying the scriptures, meditating and working, perhaps as teachers or medical carers. They live simply and may go out with a begging bowl.

Buddhist families normally keep a statue of the Buddha in the home and some families have a special shrine room. They may place offerings of flowers, candles, incense and food in front of the statue.

FESTIVALS

Different Buddhist countries and cultures have their own distinct festivals. In relation to the Western (fixed) calendar all Buddhist festivals are moveable because of being based on the lunar calendar. In general Buddhist festivals tend to be times of remembrance and reaffirmation rather than festivity.

Losar is a Tibetan Buddhist festival celebrating the Buddha's early life and marks the new year. It takes place at the February full moon and people clean their homes in preparation for it, signifying a new start. Lamps are carried through homes and monks wear bright costumes and masks to scare off evil spirits.

Asala marks the preaching of the Buddha's first sermon. It is normally celebrated in July and monks preach special sermons for the occasion. In Kandy, a city in Sri Lanka, it is celebrated at the festival of the Sacred Tooth during which the Buddha's tooth is paraded through the streets.

Uposatha days take place each week and are traditionally the days when monks meet to reaffirm their vows. Devout lay people also make religious observances on those days, often visiting the local temple or monastery to take gifts for the monks. The most important uposatha day each month is the one which falls on the full moon.

SCRIPTURES

For the first few centuries after the Buddha's death the Buddha's teachings were conveyed by oral tradition. Various councils were held to determine what the Buddha had actually taught and it was during this period that some of the early divisions amongst Buddhists became evident. At one of these councils in Sri Lanka during the first century BCE the teachings were first written down in the ancient language of Pali (in which it is believed the Buddha spoke) by Theravada monks. These became known as the **Pali Canon** or the **Tipitaka** – the threefold division of the Vinaya Pitaka (the monastic rules), the Sutta Pitaka (literally the "thread" that links the main teachings of the Buddha in the Four Noble Truths and the Eightfold Path) and the Abhidhamma Pitaka (a philosophical commentary on the main Buddhist teachings).

The popular Dhammapada is drawn from the Sutta Pitaka, as are the Jataka Tales – stories of the Buddha's previous lives.

Mahayana Buddhists also accept other scriptures as authentic, even if they could not be traced directly back to the Buddha historically. For example, the Lotus Sutra (or the Lotus of the True Law) is believed by some Mahayana Buddhists to be the final teaching of the Buddha and thus is highly venerated in the Mahayana Canon.

Mahayana scriptures were written down in the ancient Indian language of Sanskrit, which is why spellings of Buddhist terms often vary when transliterated into English:

Sidhatta Gotama (Pali); Siddharta Gautama (Sanskrit)
Dhamma (Pali); Dharma (Sanskrit)
etc..

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CHRISTIANITY

PEOPLE

At its origin, Christianity appeared to be a reforming Jewish sect, but the early Christians quickly expanded beyond Judaism and accepted non-Jews (Gentiles) into their membership. The Roman Empire provided the infrastructure to enable the young religion to expand into Europe and parts of Asia and North Africa, eventually developing its key 'headquarters bases' in Rome and Constantinople. In the fourth century of the Christian era the Empire itself officially became Christian.

Long-simmering divisions led to a major split between eastern (Orthodox) and western (Catholic) Christianity in the 11th century CE. The other great division, the 16th century **Reformation**, initiated by Martin Luther, resulted in a relatively monolithic but politically diverse Roman Catholic dominance of southern Europe and a more northerly Protestantism, within which many sub-divisions have continued to appear. All three main branches of Christianity took the opportunity to expand westwards towards the New World and especially from the 18th and 19th centuries towards the east and the south, particularly through missionary expansion into the developing world. It was the clash of those different forms of Christianity in the "mission fields" that gave initial impetus to the 20th century movement for Christian unity, **the ecumenical movement**. Relationships between the different branches of Christianity remain, at times and in certain places, difficult, even antagonistic, but elsewhere new understanding and trust have brought about inter-church co-operation and renewal, and even some minor reuniting of traditions.

The cross symbol is sometimes shown with the figure of Christ present (the crucifix) and sometimes without, emphasising the resurrection of Jesus from death. Many churches are designed in the shape of a cross (cruciform).

BELIEFS

Jesus' followers gave him the title **Christ**, which means Messiah or "the anointed one". Most Christian traditions teach that the one God is expressed in three "persons" – the Father, the Son (Jesus) and the Holy Spirit, a doctrine known as **The Holy Trinity**.

The ancient creeds of the Church – the Apostles' Creed and the Nicene Creed – are still used by many Christians as statements of their belief. Some denominations also express their beliefs in catechisms or in statements which emerged from the time following the Reformation (such as the 39 Articles or the Westminster Confession).

Most Christians celebrate their faith together by joint worship and especially at **communion** services (sometimes called the Eucharist or the Lord's Supper). This act recalls Jesus sharing bread and wine with his disciples on the night before his crucifixion, when he said: "Do this in remembrance of me". Despite the centrality of communion in the worship of most traditions, Christians have some quite different beliefs about the meaning and significance of the communion. These differences stem from the attempt to interpret what Jesus meant when he said of the bread "this is my body" and of the wine "this is my blood". Catholics and Orthodox

take these words most literally (especially in the Catholic doctrine of transubstantiation), while many Protestants emphasise the communion as a symbolic memorial.

All Christians affirm the centrality of the life and teaching of Jesus, but while most traditions emphasise the death and resurrection of Jesus as the means of achieving salvation, some give as much or more weight to the example of Jesus and his message of love and service to others.

COMMUNITIES

One of the major divisions among Protestant Christians is over the issue of baptism (which signifies entry into the Christian faith) and whether it should be administered to infants or only to adult believers who have made a personal confession of their faith.

Some Protestant Christians term themselves as **Evangelicals**, emphasising the importance of personal commitment to Christ and generally taking a more conservative or literal approach to the interpretation of scripture. Evangelicals can be found in all the major Protestant denominations, and some denominations (such as Pentecostals, the Brethren and others) are entirely evangelical in their outlook.

The Ecumenical Movement began in the early 20th century and encourages Christians to work together and seek unity. Ecumenical activities may include prayer, shared worship, joint discussion and study, joint social action and co-operation in charitable activities. In some places there are local or national councils of churches or inter-church clergy fellowships.

Christianity in Ireland was established in the 5th century of the Christian era. The most numerous tradition today is Catholic and the largest Protestant denominations are the Presbyterian Church and the Church of Ireland (Anglican). There are only a few Orthodox Christians in Ireland. Traditional antagonisms and conflicts between Catholics and Protestants owe as much or more to national, political and cultural identity as to theology. Despite the negative image there have been some striking examples of reconciliation, renewal and healing between Catholic and Protestant Christians in Northern Ireland.

PLACES OF WORSHIP

Christians use different terms for the places of worship in their various traditions – church is the most common, but other terms include: cathedral (usually a large building, the most important church in a region or diocese); chapel (sometimes a smaller church); Meeting House (an older Protestant term, but still used by Quakers); Gospel Hall (used by some evangelical Christians).

In many churches the focal point is the communion table (or altar in some traditions), emphasising the centrality of the **communion** in faith and worship. Some Protestant traditions focus as much or more on the pulpit, emphasising the importance of preaching the Word of God.

Christian worship in some traditions is visually rich, sacramental, full of symbol and ritual, while in other traditions simplicity, extempore prayer or silence may be emphasised. Some Christians still use unaccompanied plainchant, many sing traditional and often ancient hymns, some sing contemporary songs complete with guitars, drums and movement, others sing only the Psalms of David, while others do not sing at all.

Leadership in worship in most Christian traditions is conducted by ordained clergy. In Catholic,

Orthodox and some Protestant traditions the term priest is used, though many Protestants speak simply of a minister or pastor. In some Protestant denominations leadership is provided entirely by lay people.

FESTIVALS

The sombre period leading up to Easter includes **Holy Week** (recalling Jesus' arrival in Jerusalem, his Last Supper with his followers and his arrest) and **Good Friday** (the trial and crucifixion of Jesus). Special meditative services are held in many churches.

Other Christian festivals include:

- Pentecost – recalling the time when the first Christians received the Holy Spirit
- Harvest – celebrating the Creation and expressing thanks for the provision of food
- Palm Sunday – marking the entry of Jesus to Jerusalem before his crucifixion.

Other special times for Christians are:

- Lent – traditionally a time of penitence and fasting recalling Jesus' 40 days in the wilderness before he commenced his ministry
- Advent – the period of preparation before Christmas, traditionally a time of reflection.

Many Christians, especially in the Catholic, Orthodox and Anglican traditions, celebrate Saints' Days – occasions to remember some of the special characters of Christian history, from biblical times to the recent past. Some of these are times for quiet reflection in worship, while others are the focus of secular, cultural as well as religious celebration (such as St. Patrick's Day in Ireland or the United States).

SCRIPTURES

Reading the Bible forms a significant part of the worship of all Christian traditions, and many Christian hymns are based on scripture passages. The Old Testament Psalms are also sung in many Christian churches (as well as in Jewish worship). Many Christians also read the Bible in their private devotions or in study groups.

The Old Testament was written in Hebrew, the ancient language of the Jews, but the first Christians chose to write the New Testament in Greek because at that time it was the international language of the eastern Mediterranean region. The Roman Church translated the whole Bible into Latin and this was the standard for western European Christians for many centuries. Since the time of the Reformation, however, most Christians now have the Bible in their own vernacular language.

Most Christians give emphasis to the centrality of the Bible – Old and New Testaments – believing it to be the inspired word of God and the primary source of authority for faith and practice. However, some give significant weight also to tradition and the corporate teaching of the Church. Approaches to the Bible range from the very literal to a much more critical engagement with the texts, and some more radical thinkers have challenged many traditional theological tenets.

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HINDUISM

PEOPLE

The term 'Hinduism' is really a term used by travellers to India in the 18th and 19th centuries to describe the different but related religious ideas, cultures and philosophies which they found there. It has been suggested that it is more accurate to speak of "Hinduisms" rather than a single tradition. Hindu religious leaders prefer to use the term Sanatana Dharma (the universal law of order – unity in diversity) instead of Hinduism. (The word 'Hindu' stems from the Sanskrit term to describe India – Sapta Sindhu [pronounced Hapta Hindu] – the land of seven great rivers: Ganges, Yamuna, Sarasvati, Godavari, Indus, Narmada, and Cauvery.)

The Hindu traditions are believed to have come to India through the arrival in India of the Aryans. They came from the west around 1700-1500 BCE, though some dispute this and point to earlier traditions native to the Indus Valley. The oldest of the Hindu scriptures, the **Vedas**, were written in the period between 1500 and 500 BCE, known as the Vedic Period.

The origins of the **Om** (sometimes given as Aum) symbol are obscure but the sound is believed to be an aspect of the creation of the cosmos.

Another significant Hindu symbol is the **swastika**, which is found all over Hindu temples, signs, altars, pictures and iconography in India and Nepal. It is seen as pointing in all four directions (North, East, South and West) and thus signifies stability and groundedness. The swastika is considered extremely holy and auspicious by all Hindus and is regularly used to decorate all sorts of items to do with Hindu culture. (The symbol is found widely in the ancient world but was taken over by the Nazis in the 1920s as a symbol of white supremacy.)

BELIEFS

The concept of **Brahman**, the impersonal supreme universal being, is sometimes confused with **Brahma** – the creator God. The two words are almost the same, but Brahma is regarded as a personal being. The other closely related word is **Brahmin** – the priest or priestly caste.

Hindus believe that the supreme reality – Brahman – is not limited and therefore can be known in many forms (avatars), both male and female. These include *Vishnu* (incarnated as *Lord Krishna* or *Lord Rama*), *Lakshmi* (Vishnu's wife), *Shiva* (the Lord of the Dance), *Ganesha* (the elephant-headed god) and *Hanuman* (the monkey god). *Krishna* is the most popular of these manifestations of God for many Hindus. His name means "the most attractive person". Many stories and legends are told about the various deities, and statues (*murtis*) and images of the gods are displayed in Hindu temples and homes. The images in a Hindu shrine are often painted blue, as a symbol of holiness.

Hindus believe that when a person dies the soul (*atman*) moves on to another being – which may be a person, an animal or a plant. The actions which affect this process of rebirth are known as **karma**. A good karma in this life will mean a good life next time; a bad karma in this life will mean a hard life the next time.

Because of their belief that all living beings are spiritual by nature most Hindus do not eat meat or fish and lead a non-violent lifestyle.

COMMUNITIES

Since the 1830s many Hindus have migrated from India to other parts of the world – often to work on plantations in the Caribbean, eastern and southern Africa and also to parts of the Pacific. Since the Second World War (and following Indian independence) many have also migrated to Britain, Ireland and North America, where there are now substantial Hindu communities.

The Caste system (*jati*) has been a traditional feature of Indian culture and is therefore closely tied in with religious practice, although modern Indian governments have attempted to outlaw it. It relates to social status at birth and stems from the exclusivity of certain occupations, attempting to keep different castes and sub-castes separate from each other.

Caste relates to **dharma** – the social and religious duty of a person according to his or her status in life. Some groups of people are believed to be good at certain things and thus it is their dharma to live according to their group (*varna*). There are four main varnas:

- Brahmins – priests
- Kshatriyas – soldiers
- Vaishyas – shopkeepers and farmers
- Shudras – servants.

Mohandas K. Gandhi (1869-1948), the great Indian social and political reformer, highlighted the abuse and ill-treatment of those of no caste or untouchables (*dalits*) whom he termed *Harijan* – children of God. In some sections of Indian society these divisions still run deep.

PLACES OF WORSHIP

Hindu temples range from the small and simple to the very grand and elaborately decorated, outside as well as inside. Each temple has at least one priest who looks after the images of the gods and leads the prayers. People may come to worship individually or in groups. Group worship normally involves the singing of hymns from the Vedas, saying prayers and lighting a small fire, and waving a live flame over the images of the gods. A dot or stripe of coloured powder on the forehead is a sign that a person has been to worship. This is called **tilak**.

Hindu homes will always have a shrine, normally small and simple, though well-off families may use a whole room. The shrine always includes an image or picture of one or more of the gods surrounded by flowers, decorations and perfume or incense. At least once a day a Hindu will spend time at the shrine – making *puja* – and reciting from the scriptures. They begin with the word *aum* – a way of expressing their oneness with the eternal spirit of the universe. They may meditate in order to focus their thoughts only on God. A devout Hindu may believe that everything they do, including everyday household tasks, can be counted as worship.

Outside India temples have often been converted from other buildings, including houses or even disused schools or churches.

FESTIVALS

The popular festival of Diwali, which is also celebrated by Sikhs, marks the start of the New Year (in October or November) for many Hindus.

It is said that Hindus have a festival for every day of the year – and more! Some are very widely celebrated while others relate only to certain communities.

The Hindu year varies from region to region in India, so Indians celebrate New Year (*Annakuth*) for instance at different times. Most Hindu calendars are lunar, each month beginning with the New Moon.

Because of the wide range of Hindu festivals everyone has their favourite which depends on where they live, their caste, their chosen god, etc.. *Diwali* and *Holi* are the best-known festivals outside India, but other popular festivals are:

- o *Ramanavami* – Rama's birthday – around March/April
- o *Krishnajanmashtami* – Krishna's birthday – July/August
- o *Rakshabandhan* – full moon during the month of Krishna's birthday
- o *Navratri* – Nine Nights – September/October (also called *Durgapuja*)
- o *Dassehra* – the day after the end of Navaratri
- o *Mahashivatri* – the appearance of Shiva – January/February

SCRIPTURES

The Hindu Vedas existed for a long time in oral tradition before eventually being written down. There are four Vedas, each one containing

- hymns of praise
- instructions for fire rituals
- prayers for worship and meditation
- discussions between teachers and pupils.

The **Gayatri Mantra** from the Rig Veda (which altogether contains over one thousand poems) is used by many Hindus in morning worship:

*"We meditate on the most excellent splendour of the Creator.
May we be guided and inspired by his wisdom."*

The **Upanishads** (meaning 'sit down near' or 'lessons') are the last part of each Veda. They were written around 600 BCE and introduced the idea of reincarnation. People used to sit down near wise teachers and learn from them.

The **Sutras** (meaning 'threads') are short sayings and verses based on the Vedas and were written between 500 and 100 BCE.

There are also several famous epic spiritual poems, best known of which are the Ramayana which tells the story of Prince Rama (written around 100 BCE and 100 CE) and the *Bhagavad-gita* (the Song of God) written around 250 CE. The narrative stories from the Ramayana or the Puranas are much loved by children and are very familiar, often being represented in comic strips or videos.

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ISLAM

PEOPLE

Muslims today can be found in many countries and many cultures, speaking many languages.

When **Muhammad** was born in the city of **Makka**, in 570 CE, the city was the centre of a prosperous caravan route and as an adult he became a camel-driver and trader working for **Khadijah**, a rich widow whom he later married. On his journeys he met people of many faiths and became an earnest seeker after truth. Muhammad was greatly troubled by the idols in the *Ka'ba* in Makka and also by the oppression of the poor, violence, drunkenness and ill-treatment of women and children. At the age of 40 Muhammad had the first of many visions and was given words to recite by the Angel Gabriel. These recitations eventually became written down as the Qur'an.

He began to preach but encountered persecution and in 622 CE Muhammad moved to Medina. After a long campaign Muhammad re-entered **Makka** in 629 CE and purified the *Ka'ba* from its idols. He died in Medina in 632 CE.

PRAYER

Muslims recite their prayers (**salat**) every day at set times, facing towards Makka (as taught by the Prophet himself), which is south east from Britain and Ireland. The five traditional times of prayer are: *Dawn; Noon; Mid-Afternoon; After Sunset; Night Time*. If the worshipper is not in a mosque a prayer mat is set down to ensure that the place where prayer takes place is clean. The shoes or sandals are also removed.

In order to prepare themselves for prayer Muslims go through a routine of washing or ablutions – **wudu**. This is carried out before prayer according to a strict pattern. Following a declaration to worship with a pure heart the worshipper washes hands, mouth, face, arms and feet three times each.

BELIEFS

The words of the **Shahada** sum up the faith of Islam:

There is no God but God and Muhammed is his Messenger.

(Allah is the only Arabic word for God.) A person who can recite and believe the Shahada is a Muslim.

Shari'a

Muslim conduct is based on a code known as the *Shari'a*, sometimes translated as "law". It is Allah's law based on the Qur'an and the Hadith or teaching of the Prophet. The *Shari'a* provides a common code of behaviour for Muslim societies in many different countries and cultures. However, law in Islam is universal and egalitarian. Muslims regard it as the law for

all humankind.

Shari'a literally means "the road to the watering hole" – it is the clear/right road – the straight path. This is the path which the Muslim must follow as he or she strives to reach the Creator and to do the will of the one God.

Shari'a consists of things which are:

- expressly prohibited
- expressly enjoined
- disliked but not prohibited
- recommended but not enjoined
- simply permitted through silence.

Only a few things are actually prohibited under *shari'a*; most of life comes under the category of those things which are permitted through silence.

Some Shi'a Muslims use a different image to characterise their faith, likening it to a tree – of which the roots are the beliefs and the practices of faith are the branches.

COMMUNITIES

Shi'ah Muslims are found mostly in Iran (Persia), parts of Iraq, Yemen, Lebanon, Afghanistan and India, and there are Shi'ah minorities in many other Muslim countries.

An *Imam*, which means 'example', is leader of the prayers in the mosque. In the Sunni tradition he may be any male Muslim of good standing and is not in any sense an ordained minister. In the Shi'a tradition, however, the Imam is a more significant spiritual leader often charismatic in style.

A tradition within Shi'ah Islam looks for a 'Hidden Caliph', the *Mahdi*, who will be the last caliph of all. He will come at the end of time to conquer evil and reward the faithful.

The resident Muslim population of **Northern Ireland** is about 2,000 including many business people, professional and medical personnel, plus others who spend some time as students. Members of the local community have come mainly from India and Pakistan, but there are also many from Arab countries and North Africa, with a growing number of students, especially from Malaysia. Significant growth in the resident Muslim community is evident in recent years. The largest community is based in Belfast, but smaller groups are based in centres such as Antrim, Craigavon, Londonderry, Coleraine, Newtownards, Ballymena, etc., each with their own facilities for Friday Prayers. A Belfast Mosque and Islamic Community Centre was established in the early 1980s. It is a converted house with an upstairs carpeted area serving as a main prayer hall. It has facilities for daily prayers and Friday Prayers and also for children's classes, Arabic classes, a Ladies' Circle and various special events and seminars. A Northern Ireland Muslim Family Association has also been established (www.nimfa.org).

The Muslim population of the UK as a whole is about 1.5 million.

PLACES OF WORSHIP

The Arabic word **Masjid** means "bowed down" or "a place of prostration". It comes to us via Egyptian (*masgid*) and French (*mosquée*) as **mosque**.

The first *masjid* (**Masjid al-Nabi** – the Mosque of the Prophet) was in Medina, where it was bbc.co.uk/ni/learning/ks3citizenship

established by Muhammad in the house where he lived and where his tomb is to be found.

The mosque is the place of assembly (*jum'a*) for salat (*prayer*). A special place is not essential for salat, but it is desirable and should be attended when possible. There is special merit in saying one's prayers in a mosque. According to the Qur'an, *masjids* are "houses which God has allowed to be built, that his name may be spoken in them". (sura 24:36)

The features of a Mosque

- The Minaret (*menara*): from where the call to prayer is made by the *mu'adhdhin* (often spelt *muezzin*)
- Prayer Hall: where people assemble to pray
- *Mihrab* (niche): in the wall of the hall to indicate the *qibla* – direction of *Makka*
- *Minbar* (pulpit): from where the sermon is preached at Friday prayers
- *Dakka* (platform): including a seat for the *mu'adhdhin* and from where further calls to prayer are made (only in some mosques)
- *Kursi* (a traditional chair or stand): on which a copy of the Qur'an is set (while the reader sits on the floor)
- A room for *wudu* – ablutions before prayer

FESTIVALS

During **Eid-ul-Adha** an animal is slaughtered and the meat shared with the poor. Some Muslims just give money to the poor rather than sacrifice an animal. Children may accompany their parents to special Eid prayers in the morning and there are new clothes and gifts from relatives and friends.

Eid-ul-Fitr cards often include a quotation from the Qur'an and display the words **Eid mubarak** – A Happy Eid. In Muslim countries both Eids are a major public holiday.

Mawlid-al-Nabi (the Birthday of the Prophet) is celebrated on the 12th of Rabi al-Awwal (the third month). It is one of a number of smaller festivals which relate to events in the life of the Prophet or other occasions. Some are celebrated differently and with greater or lesser emphasis in various parts of the Muslim world.

All Islamic religious holidays follow the **Hijri** calendar – the lunar calendar. (It is so named because of its origins in Muhammad's *Hijra*, the migration from Mecca to Medina.) As the lunar year is about 11 days shorter than the solar year this means that all festivals move 'backwards' through the year in relation to the dates commonly used around the world. Thus a festival which in one year is in the middle of the summer will be in the winter a decade later. This prevents Muslim festivals from taking on a seasonal character which is often associated with those of other religions.

SCRIPTURES

The Qur'an is divided into 114 suras (chapters) which are placed in decreasing order of length.

The first sura, Al Fatihah (which means 'Opening'), is the most familiar of all as it is recited many times a day during each prayer time and is the first sura learnt by heart by children:

*Praise be to Allah, Lord of the Worlds,
The beneficent, the merciful,
Owner of the Day of Judgement,
Thee alone we worship;*

*Thee alone we ask for help.
Show us the straight path,
The path of those whom thou hast favoured;
Not the path of those who earn thine anger*

Fundamentally the Qur'an is in Arabic, although translations are available in most languages. All Muslims learn it in Arabic whatever their native language. A translation of the Qur'an is at best an *interpretation*.

The Hadith is an important collection of sayings and teachings, many of them attributed directly to Muhammad. While the sayings of the Hadith do not carry the same weight as the Qur'an, they nevertheless are regarded as significant and are often quoted by Muslims. They cover many of the questions which a Muslim might have to face in everyday life, such as how to treat other people, the practice of faith and dealing with exemptions from fasting during Ramadan.

TEACHER'S NOTES

RELIGION

FAST FACTS

JUDAISM

PEOPLE

Many Jews have lived away from the ancient Kingdoms of Israel and Judah (renamed as Palestine by the Romans) for centuries. By the time of the Roman occupation the **diaspora** (scattering of people with a common origin) was already well established, with Jewish communities living in Babylonia and throughout the Roman Empire. Following failed rebellions against Roman rule, in 70 CE and again in 132 CE, the Jews were expelled from Palestine and established communities in many other parts of North Africa, Asia and Europe. Despite much persecution throughout the succeeding centuries Jewish communities survived and spread further afield.

The diaspora led to the establishment of two major communities of European Judaism, each with their own traditions: the **Sephardim** in Spain and related areas and the **Ashkenazim** mainly in central, eastern and northern Europe.

Nineteenth century persecutions (*pogroms*) in eastern Europe led to the emigration of many Jews to Britain, Ireland and especially North America. Although there was always some Jewish presence in Palestine, from the beginning of the twentieth century an increasing number of Jews began to return to Palestine as settlers. This was intensified after the end of World War II with the establishment of the State of Israel in 1948.

European anti-Semitism in the inter-World-War period under fascism and Nazism led to the *Holocaust* in which six million Jews (including one million children) perished in the death camps and gas chambers (along with members of other minority groups). Holocaust Memorial Day is now marked every year on 27 January (the date of the liberation of Auschwitz) with special reflective activities.

BELIEFS

Jewish faith in one God is expressed in **The Shema** (Hebrew for "hear"), which is recited each morning and evening. The words are from the Hebrew Scriptures (Deuteronomy 6:4,5):

Hear, O Israel!
The Lord is our God, the Lord is one!
And you shall love the Lord your God
with all your heart
and with all your soul
and with all your might.

The *Shema* teaches Jews that they are to strive for holiness by loving God, accepting his providence and submitting to his law, which involves keeping the 613 commandments (*mizvot*). The doorposts of Jewish homes normally have a *mezuzah* – a small decorative box with the words of the *Shema* inside.

Orthodox Jews look to a coming anointed leader, the *Messiah*, who will reign in Jerusalem and rebuild the temple. Many attitudes towards the modern state of Israel and the future

of Jerusalem centre on this belief, which is held with great passion by some. Within Reform Judaism, however, the idea of the Messiah has been spiritualised to symbolise God's kingdom on earth of love, peace and righteousness – "a golden messianic age".

Hebrew dietary laws require the careful preparation of food according to biblical laws. It is only permitted (*kosher* – meaning proper or correct) to eat herbivorous animals – with a cloven hoof and that chew the cud: ox, sheep, goat, deer; also chicken, duck, turkey, goose, but not birds of prey. Animal slaughter is by specially trained kosher butchers – *shochtim* – who are well-versed in the biblical rules. Milk and meat must be kept separately and not cooked or served together and utensils must be washed and stored separately.

For observing Jews the Sabbath (*shabat*) involves no work or school; no housework or homework; no "kindling"; no shopping or preparing food; no money (pockets are emptied). Similar rules apply to major Jewish holy days.

COMMUNITIES

Jewish traditions are diverse, including:

- *Orthodox* (in various groups including "Ultra-Orthodox") – taking a strong position on the revelation of the Torah and a generally conservative approach to Jewish practices
- *Reform* – dating from the late 18th and early 19th centuries CE in Central Europe – taking more liberal views of the Torah and other issues (such as the role of women)
- *Conservative* – including the *Masorti* movement in the USA, Israel and the UK – which takes a middle position between Orthodox and Reform
- *Liberal and Progressive* – a more radical breakaway from Reform Judaism – including a significant minority of British Jews.

In addition to the modern Jewish "denominations", various movements and traditions have emerged within Judaism over the centuries including followers of the **Kabbalah**, a mystic tradition, and the **Hasidim**, a pietistic and ascetic movement commencing in the 18th century CE in eastern Europe. Each of these traditions has contributed to the shape of contemporary Judaism.

In 1771 the recorded existence of a "Jew Butcher" suggests that there was a Jewish community in Belfast. Growth took place from the 1840s and in 1871-2 the first purpose-built synagogue was established. From 1881 there were significant new arrivals, fleeing the Russian pogroms, and from 1903 they joined with the main Hebrew congregation. In 1898 a Jewish elementary school was established, followed in 1904 by a new synagogue. At around the turn of the century Sir Otto Jaffe, a prominent Jewish businessman, was twice Lord Mayor of Belfast. The present synagogue in North Belfast was opened in 1964 and by 1967 there were about 1,350 Jews living in Northern Ireland. In recent decades the small Jewish communities in other towns have almost entirely disappeared and the main community is centred in Belfast where numbers continue to decline.

PLACES OF WORSHIP

Worship in the synagogue (often referred to as *Shul*) is normally led by a *rabbi* (teacher) and, in larger synagogues, a cantor (*chazzan*) who sings some of the prayers.

During services the congregation faces the Holy Ark (*aron kodesh*), which is oriented towards Jerusalem. By the Ark the *Ner Tamid* (everlasting light) burns – symbolising the eternal presence of God. Two symbolic tablets of stone are placed above the Ark with the Hebrew words (or initial letters) of the 10 Commandments. Facing the Ark on an elevated platform

(*Bimah*) there is a reading desk from where the Torah is chanted and sermons are preached, symbolising the precept that the law is higher than humankind.

In Orthodox synagogues women and children (including boys who are not yet *Bar Mitzvah*) sit separately from the men, sometimes in a gallery. This practice is no longer common in Reform or Progressive synagogues (and even many Orthodox synagogues have only token divides).

The **Tallit** – prayer shawl – is worn by men at the morning service and all day on *Yom Kippur*. It is made from wool or silk and is normally white with black or blue stripes and fringes on each corner. (Outside the Orthodox tradition it is also worn by women.) The *yarmulka* (or *kippah*) – a skull cap – is worn by male Jews in the synagogue, but many Orthodox Jewish men wear it at all times.

Men taking part in weekday morning prayers often wear the **Teffilin** – leather boxes, sometimes called *phylacteries*, containing the words of the *Shema*. These are strapped to the arm (close to the heart) and the forehead (close to the mind), based on Exodus 13:1-16 and Deuteronomy 6:4-9: "...bind these words for a sign upon your hand and a frontlet between your eyes". They are not worn on the Sabbath or during festivals.

FESTIVALS

Chanukkah ("dedication"), an eight-day festival of lights, takes place in November/December. It celebrates the recapture and rededication of the Temple in Jerusalem in 165 BCE by Judas the Macabee after it had been desecrated by the Greeks (1 Macabees 4:48-59). The menorah had been badly damaged so one was made out of spears. However, there was only one single jar of oil – enough for just one day – which was required in order to keep the *Ner Tamid* (everlasting light) burning. It took 8 days until more oil could be prepared, but the miracle was that the *Ner Tamid* kept burning throughout that time. In the home, a candle is lit on the *Chanukkiah* for each day of the festival. Gifts are exchanged and special oil-related foods are prepared such as doughnuts and *latkes* (fried grated potato cakes).

On Passover Eve the *Seder* meal is eaten, during which the story of deliverance from slavery is told in the words of the *Haggadah* (the Telling, the Story). After this a child asks the father to retell the Exodus story: "Why is this night different from all other nights?". Other questions are based on the symbolic food items that are placed on the seder plate to remind the faithful of the deliverance from Egypt: a roasted shankbone; a roasted egg; three loaves of unleavened bread; bitter herbs; a green vegetable dipped in salt water; *charoset* (a paste made from nuts, cinnamon, wine and apples).

Other festivals include:

Shavuoth: commemorating the giving of the Ten Commandments

Sukkot: the harvest festival of Tabernacles

Simhat Torah: the end and beginning of the annual cycle of Torah readings

Purim: the Festival of Lots (based on the Biblical story of Esther)

In the Jewish lunar calendar years can vary between 355 and 385 days but remains remarkably synchronised with the national calendar.

SCRIPTURES

The most important document for all Jews is the Bible (**TeNaKh**), including **the Law** (Torah), **the Prophets** (Nevi'im) and **the Writings** (Ketuvim). (*TeNaKh* is an acronym of these three names.)

For Orthodox Jews the Torah is the actual word of God, as written down by Moses. More liberal forms of Judaism interpret this concept less literally.

In Jewish worship the Torah is read aloud in Hebrew in 54 sections, spanning the year. The readings are from the Torah scroll using a *yad* (a silver pointer).

(The Hebrew Scriptures are also included in the Christian Bible, where they are known as *The Old Testament*.)

The Talmud (meaning study or learning) is a very large body of commentary and discussion written after the diaspora and based on the Torah and other scriptures. It includes judgements, opinions, descriptions of practices, etc.. For Orthodox Jews its study is a religious duty, although it is taken less seriously by the various non-Orthodox groups. The Talmud has had a tremendous effect upon Jewish life and schools of thought.

Bar Mitzvah A boy reaches adulthood in Jewish terms on his thirteenth birthday – when he becomes *bar mitzvah* (son of the commandment). After his birthday, usually on a Shabat, there is a special ceremony at which he is called forward to read in Hebrew from the Torah and the Prophets. This serves as a public announcement of his coming of age and he may now wear a *tallit* and the *tefillin* and read publicly from the Torah at synagogue services.

In Reform/Progressive (and even sometimes in Orthodox) communities girls may mark their achievement of adulthood at age twelve in a **Bat Mitzvah** (daughter of the commandment) ceremony. This is meant to encourage girls to have a more active role and takes a similar form to the *Bar Mitzvah*.

TEACHER'S NOTES

RELIGION

FAST FACTS

SIKHISM

PEOPLE

Guru Nanak was born near Lahore in 1469 and was brought up as a Hindu but taught by a Muslim poet and musician. He learned from both faiths but came to believe that religious ritual was unimportant and unhelpful, as were the endless arguments between Hindus and Muslims. He said "There is neither Hindu nor Muslim ... I shall follow God's path". *Sikh* means a pupil or disciple.

After Guru Nanak there were nine other gurus, who continued to develop the new faith. Some contributed to the writings that ultimately became the Sikh scriptures, the *Adi Granth*. The tenth Guru, **Gobind Singh** (1661-1708), established the *Khalsa*, the brotherhood of Sikhs, in 1699 CE and decreed that his successor should not be a person but the Sikh scriptures. He gave to the *Adi Granth* the title of Guru – the **Guru Granth Sahib**.

The Sikh homeland of the **Punjab** (the land of 'five streams', all flowing into the River Indus) is where most Sikhs still live. It became divided between India and Pakistan at the time of partition and independence in 1947. Lahore, the capital of the Punjab, is now in Pakistan while the most important Sikh temple, the Golden Temple at Amritsar, is in India. Some Sikhs believe that there should be a separate Sikh state, Khalistan – the land of the *Khalsa* (brotherhood/family).

BELIEFS

Sikhs believe that the soul goes through cycles of birth and rebirth and that to stop this they should lead lives of caring and service to others, so as to move towards unity with God.

The five Ks (*panj kakkar* in Punjabi) are important symbols of belonging to the Sikh family, the *Khalsa* (which means 'the pure ones').

Kesh (hair) Sikhs do not cut their hair or their beards. Men wash their hair regularly, tie it up in a knot and cover it with a turban to keep it clean. This is a sign of living in harmony with the will of God.

Kanga (comb) This is used to keep the hair tidy and is an indication of order and self-discipline.

Kirpan (sword) A short sword (about 15cm) indicates that Sikhs should be willing to uphold truth and justice. This is regarded as a defensive weapon and should not be used offensively.

Kaccha (shorts) A practical and hygienic alternative to traditional Indian dress, indicating modesty and chastity. In India they may be worn for working on the land, but in colder climates they are worn as an undergarment.

Kara (bracelet) An iron or steel bracelet worn on the right wrist is a symbol of the unity and oneness of God.

Teenage Sikhs over 14 years of age, male and female alike, can choose to be initiated into the Sikh *Khalsa* by means of a special *Amrit* ceremony. It is a moment of commitment to the Sikh way of life, reminding Sikhs of the initiation of the *panj piare*, the first five Sikhs to be initiated

by Guru Gobind Singh. To show that they are members of the Khalsa male Sikhs all take the name *Singh* (which means *lion*) and women take the name *Kaur* (*princess*).

COMMUNITIES

On the whole Sikhs appear to have migrated to English speaking areas. Apart from the sizeable Sikh community in Britain, where there are more than a hundred Sikh temples (gurdwaras), other settled communities can be found in places like North America, Australia and New Zealand, with relatively small numbers in various western European countries.

Over the last two centuries various Sikh reform movements have arisen, most of them seeking to re-establish the purity of the religion, especially in response to Christian and Hindu proselytizing movements. Best known among these are the Nirankaris movement and the Singh Sabha movement.

PLACES OF WORSHIP

Gurdwara means "the door to the Guru". Many gurdwaras are open all day and night and hospitality is offered to people of all religions. The langar meal is vegetarian so that people of all religions can eat together. It is paid for by contributions from members of the Sikh community.

On entering the prayer hall in the gurdwara people remove their shoes and cover their heads. Everyone sits on the floor, as a sign of equality, usually with men and women on different sides. The focal point is the *rakht* (a raised platform or dais with a canopy above it) from where the Guru Granth Sahib is read.

There are no priests in the Sikh religion. Any man or woman may read from the Guru Granth Sahib, although they may receive special training to become readers or *Granthis*.

Sikh worship does not follow a set form and involves the singing of hymns and listening to the reading of the Guru Granth Sahib. After final prayers *karah parshad* (a mixture of flour, sugar, butter and water) is shared. On special occasions the whole of the Guru Granth Sahib may be read continuously, taking about 48 hours.

Around the prayer hall (the *diwan* hall) there are usually pictures of the first and last Gurus (Nanak and Gobind Singh). Most gurdwaras fly the Sikh flag (the *Nishan Sahib*) outside – an orange flag with the Khanda symbol in the middle – to represent the unity of all Sikhs.

Sikhs may also worship at home if they have a copy of the Guru Granth Sahib.

FESTIVALS

Gurpurbs mark special events (such as birthdays or martyrdoms) in the lives of the Gurus and are celebrated with prayers, processions and the reading of the Guru Granth Sahib.

Other Sikh festivals include:

The Birthday of Guru Gobind Singh (December/January)

The Martyrdom of the fifth Guru, Arjun Dev Ji (May/June)

The Martyrdom of the ninth Guru, Tegh Bahadur (November/December)

Hola Mohalla – a local festival in Anandpur in the Punjab, falling the day after the Hindu festival of Holi – a day of mock battles, poetry, music and lectures

Diwali – for Sikhs this celebrates the release of the sixth Guru, Har Gobind, from imprisonment in Delhi.

Diwali is a festival of lights in Sikhism as well as in Hinduism. When Guru Har Gobind was released the Golden Temple at Amritsar was illuminated by many lights and today lights are lit outside gurdwaras and sweets are given out. The Golden Temple continues to be a focal point for this occasion with thousands of lights.

Some Sikh communities follow the lunar *Bikrami* calendar while others, especially those based in the West, follow the new *Nanakshahi* calendar which standardises dates according to the western system to ensure that they fall on the same date each year.

SCRIPTURES

The Sikh scriptures include many hymns and poems, some of them by Guru Nanak (written down by the second Guru, Angad). Also included are many writings by Muslims and Hindus – a mark of the respect shown by Sikhs for other religions.

When the Guru Granth Sahib is carried (held above the head as a sign of respect) into the prayer hall in a gurdwara everyone stands and then bows before sitting down. When it is not being read it is covered by a highly decorated cloth. During reading the Granthi (reader) holds a *chauri* – a fan made of yak hair - which is moved from time to time over the holy book. At night the Guru Granth Sahib is placed in a special room and laid in a canopied bed with the respect that would be shown to a living Guru.

Sikhs regard the Guru Granth Sahib as the living voice of God. At its very beginning there is a thirty-eight verse hymn by Guru Nanak, the *Japji*. The first verse is known as the ***Mul Mantra***, which sums up Sikh beliefs and is used regularly in prayers:

*There is one God
Eternal Truth is his name
Maker of all things
Fearing nothing and hating nothing
Immortal, unborn, self-existent
By the grace of the Guru, made known to men.*