

Faith Lives

An Information Pack Describing

Life & Belief

in the City of Wolverhampton



WIFC

WOLVERHAMPTON INTER FAITH COUNCIL

Foreword

By

**Sehdev Bismal MBE
President, Wolverhampton Inter Faith Council**

Defining religion in precise terms is an impossible task in view of the prodigious diversity of beliefs, traditions, practices and ideas, which constitute different religions. However, if we look at what is most commonly shared by them, it is safe to say that all major religions have their own specific systems of belief and worship, often involving a code of ethics and a philosophy.

Followers of religions are often guided by the core tenets of their faith. Faith is, more or less albeit somewhat simplistically, a summation of convictions, aspirations and hopes inherent in any religion. It is faith that provides inspiration and anchor to most actions in the daily life of its adherents.

Faith is the manifestation of the core actions and beliefs and guidelines for conduct inherent in religion. This does not mean that different religions cannot work together for the common good of the wider society. All major religions in the world expect their followers to work for the good of humanity. What is sometimes missing is the will to seek out people from different faiths who will consent to work and plan together to make the society they are living in more cohesive.

This book illustrates the core beliefs and practices of all the major faiths present in the vibrant and multicultural city of Wolverhampton. It provides a window on what motivates people of different faiths in their day-to-day lives. It elucidates how people of different traditions react to milestones in their lives in their own unique way. Our hope is that this revised resource Faith Lives will offer an opportunity to people of different faiths to understand each other better and by so doing learn to interact with each other, to jointly explore in greater depth issues of common interest.

However, this is not a textbook. It is a book reflecting what actually happens in faith communities across the city. It will hopefully lead to understanding and to actual interaction between people. This should, in turn, lead to the recognition that there are equally legitimate alternative ways to resolve some of the huge issues in our life.

The purpose of this book to actively encourage, promoting our understanding; to appreciate other faiths as opposed to merely tolerating them. Goethe said: "Toleration ought in reality not to be merely a transitory mood, it must lead to recognition."

I sincerely hope that through its usage organisations, schools and communities will further their understanding of our multifaith society especially in our city and beyond. I hope this book will prove to be a very valuable resource.

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Our thanks are due to

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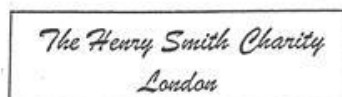
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Introduction

Wolverhampton is described these days as a "Millennium City". This is good, because Wolverhampton reflects very aptly within her citizens, the rich variety of religious and cultural colour that a 21st century city should exhibit.

For over a quarter of a century, the Wolverhampton Inter Faith Group, now known as 'Wolverhampton Inter Faith Council' has promoted and created opportunities for people from different religious backgrounds to meet together, make friends with each other, and out of this friendship develop the healthy bloodstream of mutual respect and understanding, that a peaceful society thrives upon. The WIFC celebrates a working towards a greater unity within an exciting diversity.

Since a number of serious racial/social/religious disturbances in Northern urban centres during the Summer of 2001 and the awful terrorist atrocities of the 11th September 2001 and beyond, there exists today, the realisation more than ever before, of just how important faith is to the lives of many people. There is now more of a desire to learn about the different faiths that surround us.

"Faith Lives" has been produced by the WIFC as one of its contributions to this increasing need for education, understanding and knowledge-building that will help more sensitive ways of working with each other at all levels of social and professional interaction. It is also intended as a resource for the development of understanding and community cohesion and for our younger faith community members.

The "Faith Lives" editorial team has commissioned a number of sections to be written by members of different faiths. They cover the most significant religious groups within this city. The aim of these faith-portraits is not so much to provide a theologically water-tight description of belief: they are not meant to be essays. "Faith Lives" is intended to be a set of tools that will give a glimpse into how people of different faiths actually LIVE.

At the end of each section there is a page of photographs, taken from the WIFC's "Living Faith" exhibition. This large exhibition of images complements the Faith Lives Pack, and is available for hire from the WIFC. The WIFC offer several events, activities and resources throughout the year that can complement this Education Pack.

We are grateful for the generous financial assistance of the Henry Smith Charities who have enabled "Faith Lives" to become a reality.

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THE BAHÁ'Í FAITH



BACKGROUND

Founded a century and a half ago, the Bahá'í Faith is today among the fastest growing of world religions. With more than six million followers in at least 233 countries and dependent territories, it has already become the second-most widespread faith, surpassing every religion but Christianity in its geographic reach. Bahá'ís, who come from all cultural, national, religious and socio-economic backgrounds, reside in more than 120,000 localities around the world, an expansion that reflects their dedication to the ideal of world citizenship. The community in Wolverhampton is similarly diverse, with Bahá'ís from all ages and at least five different cultural backgrounds.

The Bahá'í Faith began in 1844, in Iran. A young Persian man, later given the title of the Báb (Arabic for Gate), started to teach that he was the Forerunner of a great Messenger from God, and was preparing the way for His coming. The news spread throughout Iran, and thousands of people from all classes, including clergy and scholars, were drawn to this new movement. The religious hierarchy saw this as a threat to their power, and started to oppose the movement. The Báb and his followers were imprisoned, persecuted and many were tortured and martyred. The Báb himself, after a mock trial, was publicly executed in July 1850.

Bahá'u'lláh, the Founder of the Bahá'í Faith, was one of the early followers of the Báb, and was distinguished for His knowledge, wisdom, kindness and modesty. The only Westerner, who left a record of his meeting with Bahá'u'lláh, the English orientalist E.G. Browne, wrote: "The face of Him on whom I gazed I can never forget, though I cannot describe it... I bowed myself before one who is the object of a devotion and love which kings might envy and emperors sigh for in vain." Bahá'u'lláh, whose name means "The Glory of God" in Arabic, was born on 12 November 1817 in Teheran, to a wealthy government minister. He grew up surrounded by comfort and riches, but declined the ministerial career open to Him, and chose instead to devote His energies to a range of philanthropies, which earned Him the title "Father of the Poor." As a follower of the Báb, He was imprisoned and later exiled from His homeland. It was during His first imprisonment in a dungeon called the "black pit" (a damp and filthy former underground water reservoir, with no windows, and where murderers and highway robbers were imprisoned), where Bahá'u'lláh fully realised that He was the Promised One that the Báb had talked about. Bahá'u'lláh wrote:

"I was but a man like others, asleep upon My couch, when lo, the breezes of the All-Glorious were wafted over Me, and taught Me the knowledge of all that hath been. This thing is not from Me, but from One Who is Almighty and All-Knowing."

He spent the next 40 years of His life as a prisoner and was exiled from place to place, until He passed away in the prison city of 'Akká, in 1892, in what is present day Israel.

CORE BELIEFS

The essential message of Bahá'u'lláh is that of unity. He taught that:

- There is only one God: *"There can be no doubt whatever that the peoples of the world, of whatever race or religion, derive their inspiration from one heavenly Source and are the subjects of one God",*
- There is only one human race: *"The fundamental purpose animating the Faith of God and His Religion is to safeguard the interests and promote the unity of the human race, and to foster the spirit of love and fellowship amongst men".*
- All the world's religions have been progressive stages in the revelation of God's will, in accordance to our capacity: *"This is the changeless Faith of God, eternal in the past, eternal in the future". "Beware ...lest ye be tempted to make any distinction between any of the Manifestations of His Cause."*

Bahá'u'lláh taught that now the time has arrived for uniting all peoples into a peaceful global society. *"The earth is but one country, and mankind its citizens,"* He wrote, and further: *"We desire but the good of the world and the happiness of the nations; yet they deem us a stirrer-up of strife and sedition worthy of bondage and banishment... That all nations should become one in faith and all men as brothers; that the bonds of affection and unity between the sons of men should be strengthened; that diversity of religion should cease, and differences of race be annulled – what harm is there in this? ... Yet so it shall be; these fruitless strife's, these ruinous wars shall pass away, and the "Most Great Peace" shall come..."*

Some of the teachings of Bahá'u'lláh for bringing about peace and unity include:

- The abandonment of all prejudices
- Equality of opportunities for women and men
- Recognition of the unity of religious truths
- The elimination of the extremes of poverty and wealth
- Importance of universal education, & agreement on an international auxiliary language
- The responsibility of each person to independently search for truth
- Recognition that true religion is in harmony with reason and the true pursuit of scientific knowledge
- Need for a federal system of world government representing all peoples and nations
- Need for an international court giving equal rights, privileges and responsibilities to all peoples

SCRIPTURES, ADMINISTRATION AND WORSHIP

A unique feature of the Bahá'í Faith is the vast volumes of Bahá'u'lláh's writings that are available. The words of Bahá'u'lláh were recorded and authenticated at the time they were revealed. Bahá'u'lláh's writings constitute over a hundred volumes, and selections have been translated into more than 800 languages. Foremost amongst these, is the "Kitáb-i-Aqdas" (The Most Holy Book), which is the chief repository of the laws and institutions Bahá'u'lláh designed for the World Order He conceived. Others include the Hidden Words, containing ethical teachings and The Seven Valleys, the best known of His mystical writings.

There is no clergy in the Bahá'í Faith, as everyone has the responsibility of searching for the truth for themselves. Similarly, obeying Bahá'í laws is an individual responsibility, between each individual and God. The community conducts its business through a distinctive system of global administration, which features a network of democratically elected local, national and international-level governing assemblies.

In every locality where there are at least nine adult Bahá'ís, they form their Local Spiritual Assembly. Nine people are elected annually by secret ballot. Each country then elects their National Spiritual Assembly.

Once every five years, Bahá'ís from every National Spiritual Assembly in the world gather together on Mount Carmel in the Holy Land (near the place that Bahá'u'lláh passed away), and elect the international institution, called the Universal House of Justice. At a local level, the affairs of the community are conducted by Local Spiritual Assemblies, which are elected each year.

The centrepiece of the Bahá'í community life is the Nineteen Day Feast, a blend of worship, fellowship and grassroots democracy *"to bind... hearts together"*. Held once every 19 days, and open to both adults and children, it is the local community's regular worship gathering -- and more. Although its program is adaptable to a wide variety of cultural and social needs, the Feast always contains three elements: spiritual devotion, administrative consultation, and fellowship. As such the Feast combines religious worship (through reading from Holy Scriptures and music) with grassroots governance (through consultation between the community and the Local Spiritual Assembly) and social enjoyment (through sharing of stories, music and hospitality).

BAHÁ'Í LIFE

Prayer and Meditation.

For Bahá'ís the purpose of life is to know and love God, and to progress spiritually. As in most other religions, prayer and meditation are primary tools for spiritual development, and Bahá'ís are exhorted to pray and *"recite the verses of God every morn and eventide"*. Bahá'u'lláh Himself wrote hundreds of prayers: *"While a man prays, he sees himself in the presence of God"*. There are, among others, prayers for general use, for healing, for spiritual growth, for facing difficulties, and for humanity itself. Bahá'u'lláh also asked His followers to choose one of three "obligatory" prayers for recitation each day. The term "obligatory," as applied to these prayers, implies for Bahá'ís an understanding that humans have certain spiritual duties before God. Bahá'u'lláh also urged His followers to spend some time each day in meditation. He encouraged us to reflect each day on our deeds and their worth: *"Bring thyself to account each day ere thou are summoned to a reckoning..."*

In addition to their own personal devotions, Bahá'ís also gather together for worship and prayers. There is no set ritual, so prayers are chosen either individually or by the person hosting the meeting. Bahá'ís are also encouraged to join followers of other faiths in worshipping God and actively promote inter-faith activities. Bahá'í Houses of Worship are open to people of all faiths and traditions.

Fasting.

In March of each year, for a period of nineteen days, Bahá'ís (except the young, the old, the sick and pregnant women) are enjoined to observe a fast from food and drink between sunrise and sunset. The fast permits a period of cleansing of the body, a healthy practice when not enforced too harshly. But more importantly are the spiritual aspects of fasting:

"Physical fasting is a symbol of abstinence, and is a reminder; that is, just as a person abstains from physical appetites, he is to abstain from self-appetites and self-desires. But mere abstention from food has no effect on the spirit. It is only a symbol, a reminder. Otherwise it is of no importance."

This period of fasting immediately precedes the spring equinox, which happens to be a time of most moderate climate in all parts of the world. At the end of the fast (on the first day of spring) is the festival of Naw-Rúz, the Bahá'í New Year.

Diet.

Bahá'ís are encouraged to look after their physical, as well as their mental and spiritual health. Bahá'u'lláh gives his followers complete freedom regarding diet. However use of habit-forming drugs and alcoholic drinks are forbidden, except for medicinal purposes.

Marriage and Family Life.

Bahá'ís see marriage as the core of the family. Bahá'u'lláh describes Bahá'í marriage as *"a fortress for well being and salvation"* and encourages everyone to marry. *"Seclude not yourselves in churches and cloisters...Enter ye into wedlock, that some one may fill your place..."*.

Apart from procreation, the main purpose of marriage, the qualities and experiences of marriage and the family are important in learning how to live in the wider family – the human race. As marriage is such an important relationship, Bahá'ís place great emphasis on careful choice of a marriage partner. *"Bahá'í marriage is the commitment of the two parties one to the other, and their mutual attachment of mind and heart. Each must, however, exercise the utmost care to become thoroughly acquainted with the character of the other, that the binding covenant between them may be a tie that will endure forever. Their purpose must be this: to become loving companions and comrades and at one with each other for time and eternity..."*.

A marriage partner can come from any race or religion; in fact inter-racial marriage is welcomed as a positive demonstration of the Bahá'í belief in the unity of mankind. However, there are certain conditions to be observed before marriage takes place. The two parties must select each other without any pressure from others. Once they have decided to marry, they must seek the consent of all living parents. The purpose of this law is to strengthen the social fabric, to avoid enmity and ill feeling, and to place a certain gratitude and respect in the hearts of the children for those who have given them life. A Bahá'í who wishes to marry must have a Bahá'í ceremony. The requirements of such a ceremony are very simple – the bride and groom, before two witnesses, must state the vow: *"We will all, verily, abide by the Will of God."* If the couple wishes, they can then add further readings or prayers.

Divorce is permissible in the Bahá'í Faith, but strongly discouraged, so as to prevent disruption of family life and the disintegration of society. Bahá'u'lláh said *"The foundation of the Kingdom of God is based upon harmony and love, oneness, relationship and union, not upon differences, especially between husband and wife..."*.

Death.

Bahá'ís believe in the immortality of the soul and that *"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"*. *"Know thou of a truth that the soul, after its separation from the body, will continue to progress until it attaineth the presence of God"*.

This state of nearness to God is heaven, and hell is when we forget our purpose and stray far from His path. The purpose of our lives in this world is seen as preparation for our souls in the world's hereafter. *"Therefore in this world he must prepare himself for the life beyond. That which he needs in the world of the Kingdom must be obtained here. Just as he prepared himself in the world of the womb by acquiring forces necessary in this sphere of existence, so likewise, the indispensable forces of the divine existence must be potentially attained in this world..."*.

Bahá'í burial ceremonies are simple but also beautiful and dignified occasions. The body is regarded as the temple of the soul and should be treated with respect. Bahá'ís should be buried, not cremated and Bahá'u'lláh revealed special prayers for the funeral. He compares death to the flight of a bird freed from its cage, and advises Bahá'ís not to let their grief become excessive.

FESTIVALS AND HOLY DAYS.

There are nine Holy Days within the Bahá'í calendar, where Bahá'ís, if possible, do not go to work or to school. Amongst them are four great festivals.

The **Festival of Ridván**, "the King of Festivals", commemorates Bahá'u'lláh's public Declaration of His Prophetic Mission in the Garden of Ridván over twelve days in April/May 1863, whilst he was exiled to Baghdad. The first, ninth and twelfth days of this Festival are Holy Days.

The second important Festival and Holy Day, celebrates the Báb's Declaration, which occurred in May 1844.

The two other great Festivals are the anniversaries of the births of Bahá'u'lláh and the Báb (also Holy Days). In the Musīim lunar calendar these fall on consecutive days, the birth of Bahá'u'lláh on the second day of the month of Muharram 1233 A.H. (12 November 1817), and the birth of the Báb on the first day of the same month 1235 A.H. (20 October 1819), respectively.

In the Bahá'í calendar the first month of the year and the first day of each month are given the name "Bahá". The day of Bahá of the month of Bahá is thus the Bahá'í New Year, Naw-Rúz (first day of spring), which is also ordained as a Holy Day.

In addition to these seven Holy Days the anniversary of the Martyrdom of the Báb (July 9th) and the Ascension of Bahá'u'lláh (May 29th) are also commemorated as Holy Days.

**For further information or to contact the local Wolverhampton Community,
Please contact:**

**The National Bahá'í Centre
27 Rutland Gate, London
SW7 1PD**

Tel: 0207 590 8792

BUDDHISM



BACKGROUND

Buddhism started in North India about 500 BCE. It spread rapidly in South-East Asia where Indian culture was influential - often picking up features of the pre-existing Hindu religious system on the way. During the following thousand years it spread across Central Asia eventually providing major elements of the religious life of China and Japan. As it spread it had to learn to speak to new peoples in their own way and to tackle new problems; as a result, many different schools of thought appeared and their ways of explaining and presenting Buddhism are very varied. Nevertheless these basic ideas would be generally accepted: Three Jewels, Four Noble Truths, Three Marks of Existence and Five Ethical Rules (see Core Beliefs).

The many hundreds of schools fall into two groups: Theravada and Mahayana. Theravada means "The Way of the Elders". Its members believe it is the original form of Buddhism. It is the Buddhism of Sri Lanka, Burma, Thailand, Laos, and Kampuchea. It is sometimes called the Southern School. Theravada Buddhism stresses self-discipline and commitment as a route to freedom. The very large body of scriptures found today throughout this part of the world are taken to be the original teaching. The only written texts surviving from these early times are in Pali, one of many Indian languages current at the time of the Buddha, but now not in vernacular use anywhere. They were not committed to writing until the 1st Century BCE (oral recitation being the traditional method of transmission).

Mahayana means The Great Vehicle. It is the Buddhism of Tibet, China, Korea, Japan, Vietnam, Mongolia, Siberia and Russia. It is sometimes called the Northern School. Mahayana schools stress the need to put our own strivings and pride aside and to open ourselves to perfection as if it came from a power outside ourselves. This is done partly through worship of Buddhas and Bodhisattvas, mythic beings who have merit to share with others. Mahayana schools rely in a major way on the inspiration of teachers of more recent times and do not attempt to attribute all their scriptures to the Original Teaching.

Buddhist social organisation is significantly different from other major religions. In "Buddhist" countries we find sizeable communities of people (usually male) who spend all or part of their lives as monks. Lay people support these communities and rely on them for teaching and religious service. In these countries a high proportion of male youngsters will spend some portion of their life in a monastery. Modern world Buddhist activity carries on without this system, sometimes relying on the "Buddhist" countries to supply monks - but this places some stress on the monastery-based system.

In India, the land of its birth, Buddhism collapsed gradually in the first millennium CE, the finishing blows being associated with the invasions of conquerors from Eurasia which brought Islam to India in a major way. However there has been a significant revival in the last half-century - arising from the chance offered to low-caste Hindus, (Dalits), to escape from the domination of religious authority vested in the Brahmanic system.

In Western countries, Buddhists of Indian descent have usually come by this route.

ORIGINS

Buddhists believe that there are many worlds, and each goes through many ages of history. Each age has its own Buddha - its own bringer of light. The Buddha of our age is a great spiritual teacher who lived over 2500 years ago in Northern India. Buddhists and scholars refer to him by a number of names and titles, e.g. Shakyamuni - because he was one of the Shakyas, a people who lived in what is now the border area of Nepal and the Indian state of Bihar; Gautama - the name of his clan; Siddharta - his own personal name and, most commonly, The Buddha - Enlightened One. Generally, his birth date is given as 563 BCE. He lived for 80 years - to about 483 B.C.E.

The traditional account of the Buddha's life portrays him as growing up in a wealthy family. He was trained for power, cut off from the sufferings of ordinary people. He married and had a son. But at the age of 29, he went through a great crisis. Four sights troubled him and brought him to question the purpose of existence. These Four Signs were an old man, a sick man, a dead man, and a wandering holy man. One night, he left home secretly and set out on a quest for the truth. He became a wandering holy man - one of the many without home or wealth, who devote their lives to meditation. For many years he fasted and meditated, looking for the answer, trying desperately to make sense of life. But he could not find the truth.

Buddhist art often pictures him sitting beneath a great tree at Gaya for fifty days, in one last effort of fasting and meditation. But it was no good. At last, he gave up and had a meal... and then it happened. It came as a sudden flash of insight, the light of understanding dawning suddenly within him. This Enlightenment marked the historical beginning of the Buddhist faith, and it is the experience that marks the peak of a Buddhist life. It led the Buddha to spend the rest of his life working among the people of the Ganga plain, teaching and building up a following of devotees.

CORE BELIEFS

The Three Jewels (or Triple Gem, Tri Ratna in Pali)

Three key words are used to summarise the central institutions of Buddhism. They have supreme value for the Buddhist.

To be a Buddhist is to understand and have faith in the Three Jewels.

The Three Jewels are:

<i>Buddha</i>	Enlightened One - one who has been filled with the light of understanding, who is awake and living to the full. The historical founder of the Buddhist religion in this age of world history.
<i>Dhamma</i>	The Teachings of Buddhism - the doctrine, philosophy and ethics.
<i>Sangha</i>	The Order or Organization - those who have promised to live by a code of conduct so that they can dedicate their lives to the study and teaching of the Dhamma.

The Three Jewels are contained within a creed, which is recited by all those taking part in any Buddhist gathering. This is called the Triple Refuge - a formula that marks the essential boundary of the Buddhist community.

I take refuge in the Buddha.
I take refuge in the Dhamma.
I take refuge in the Sangha.

The Buddha's First Sermon

What was the insight contained in the moment of Enlightenment? Buddhists accept that the experience itself is beyond words. But the first words used by the Buddha to embody it are nevertheless treasured by all schools of Buddhism. That first sermon was delivered to a group of five holy men, whom he found sitting in a wood at Sarnath, near the Hindu holy city of Varanasi. It is said that it "set moving the Wheel of the Dhamma". It had two parts:

First the Buddha pointed to the two extremes, which he had experienced and rejected. Neither the life of pleasure nor that of asceticism had helped him in his quest for truth. This is "The Middle Way"

Next he tried to put into words his new understanding of the human situation. He made four simple points, "The Four Noble Truths"...

The Noble Truth of *Suffering* is this. - Birth is suffering. Ageing is suffering. Death is suffering. Sorrow and mourning, pain, grief and despair are suffering. Getting unpleasant things is suffering. Being cut off from pleasant things is suffering.

The Noble Truth of The *Cause of Suffering* is this. It is desire, passion and greed. It is looking for enjoyment, first here, then there. It is desire for the pleasures of the senses, desire for life, desire for death.

The Noble Truth of The *Ending of Suffering* is this. It is completely ending that desire – giving it up, disowning it, being freed from it, breaking away from it.

The Noble Truth of The Path, which Leads to the End of Suffering, is this. It is the *Noble Eightfold Path*. It is:

right views,	right livelihood,
right intentions,	right effort,
right speech,	right awareness,
right action,	right concentration

The Three Marks (Characteristic Features) of Existence is another of the formulae, which form the core of the Buddha's teaching. These are:

Dukkha – (Suffering, sometimes translated as un-satisfactoriness)

Suffering marks the whole of our existence, as mentioned above – but can be risen above.

Anicca – (Impermanence)

The world is a complex of interacting processes. There are constantly evolving chains of cause and effect. Nothing lasts: nothing stays the same, even for a moment. Everything is in the process of taking shape or disappearing. It makes no sense to think in terms of things, but only of events.

Anatta – (No-self)

We are a part of this shifting, dissolving world. Most people accept that our bodies change all the time but find it harder to accept that is equally true of the mind. Going further, it is usual to find that people think that beneath the shifting patterns of perception, thought and imagination is a basic and unchanging thing - a self, a soul, a real ME – the Buddha taught that there is no evidence for this. There is no such thing: just a complicated series of events that is named a self. The doctrine of Anatta is vitally important. It has implications for the whole way we see our lives and our relationships with others. This view radically departs from all other major "religions" - notably Hinduism, with which it is in many other ways inextricably mixed.

SCRIPTURE AND WORSHIP

ETHICS (Five rules of conduct, Panch Sila)

Lay Buddhists repeat this promise at all meetings and ceremonies.

"I undertake the rule of training to avoid
harming living things;
taking what is not given;
sexual misconduct;
lying or offensive speech
drugs, which cloud the mind."

These promises are designed to provide a guide and a spur to thought, not an inflexible moral code. There is much room for thought and debate about exactly how to apply the principles in a given situation. However, certain principles of behaviour have become widely accepted across a wide spectrum of the Buddhist community. For example, converts to Buddhism almost always give up meat, alcohol, tobacco and gambling. The rules for monks are much more extensive (227 rules for Theravada monks).

MEDITATION

Deriving from the widespread practices of religious India at the time of the Buddha Gautama, his teaching stresses development of mind by the practice of meditation. At the simplest level the aim is calming the mind. There are a great variety of traditions of various techniques and objectives. The idea of training oneself to be fully alive and, at the same time, free from craving, hatred and delusion is behind much meditation practice. In some traditions there are offered the possibilities of magic powers.

The word Nirvana is used to describe the highest achievement of a disciplined life. It is not possible to describe Nirvana. It is easier to say what it is not. It is not the Buddhist heaven, not a place. It is part of here and now. There are other words and phrases for Nirvana, but these too mostly tell us what it is not: It implies the ending of desire, the ending of hatred, the ending of illusion and the ending of becoming or change. Note that the Buddha, having achieved Nirvana, continued to work in the world.

MILESTONES

Social practices (on marriage, death etc) follow local culture; but it would be common to find incorporated in the ceremonies the core formulae referred to above.

DIET

Vegetarianism is common (the first moral precept refers to not killing)— but is not explicitly part of central doctrine.

LANGUAGES

Theravada Buddhist scriptures have survived in Pali – and North Indian language no longer in vernacular use (see introductory paragraph). Mahayana developments in India used Sanskrit – but the Buddhism of Central Asia, China and Japan (and later in Europe and America) developed in their own languages and scripts.

FESTIVALS

Annual festivals may take on local customs.

In Theravada Buddhism it is usual to celebrate the Enlightenment, Death etc. of the Buddha at certain times of the year. Kathina is an occasion for the presentation to the Bikkhus (monks) of new robes.

LOCAL PLACE OF WORSHIP

Buddha Vihara
Upper Zoar St
WV3 0AA

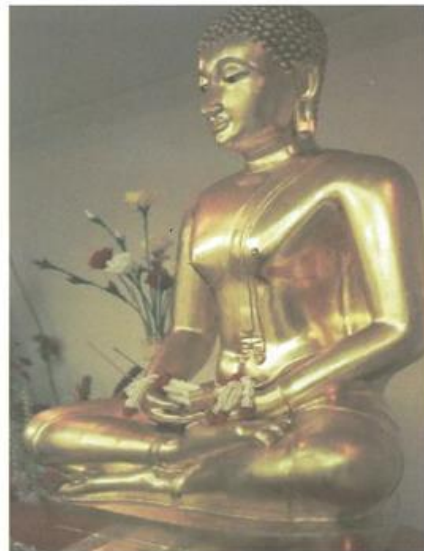
set up by Dr Ambedkar Memorial Committee of Great Britain (opened in 1991).
Theravada monks in residence.

Images of Buddhism



*Dr Ambedkar
Memorial Committee
Buddha Vihara
Upper Zoar Street*

Statue of Buddha



Woman Preaching

CHRISTIANITY



BACKGROUND

At the beginning of the third Millennium, there are now reckoned to be over two billion Christians in the world, all of whom follow the person and teachings of a single man, who walked the roads of Judea and Galilee in the Middle East two thousand years ago.

The term *Christian* was first given to followers of Jesus Christ in Antioch during the first century of the Common Era. Before this, Christians were known as *Followers of the Way*, and it was understood that this *Way* was the path laid down by Jesus Christ in his teachings and life-example. The signposts to this *Way* are to be found today in the words of the Holy Bible and in the Traditions of the Church. Christians therefore follow Jesus, believing that He is the source of both individual and global salvation.

Christians were originally seen as an offshoot of Judaism, but as more and more non-Jews became Christians, it became more and more a faith that stood rooted in Judaism, but nevertheless unique and distinctive in its own right.

Christianity came to these Islands in the earliest days through the Roman Empire. Originally, the earliest churches managed to interpret the Christian faith through the local Celtic ways. However, as the Roman Empire fell and the Holy Roman Empire grew: as the power of the Emperor lessened and the power of the Pope (which is what the Bishop of Rome was known as) grew, the influence of the Roman Church also came to Great Britain. It was Augustine who became the first Archbishop of Canterbury in 597 CE, and this was a Church under the authority of the Pope.

Through the centuries that followed, the church became very diverse, to the point that today; there are many different ways of worshipping. The different Christian groups are known as denominations. In the UK, a survey revealed that 40,000,000 people still regarded themselves to be Christians, though many of these would not necessarily practise their professed faith. At the last count, in England and Wales there were 44,699 registered places of Christian worship.

CORE BELIEFS

People who are Christians believe in the one and only God: the creator of the universe. In the Holy Bible, He is described in many ways, ranging from unfathomable power and infinite might in one hand, to loving care, gentleness and compassion in the other, who takes the greatest of interest in the minutest aspects of his creation. He didn't merely create a clockwork machine that He is watching run from a distance. God is involved and interested.

Christians believe in God who loves his creation like a parent. He nurtures, cradles and sustains what He has made. This is why Christians call God, Father.

God is experienced in our lives as human beings through His loving hands - God has touched each of us through being born as a human being. He knows and understands how we feel. He did this through being born to the Virgin Mary. In Jesus, God has experienced all that we experience. This is why we call God, Son.

Christians also experience God through his life-giving breath that brings our souls to life. This breath has the power to transform, to re-create, and to mend that which is broken or in pain. This is why we also call God, Holy Spirit.

This understanding is not three gods but One single and united God - in Trinity (Tri-unity).

Christians have at the very heart of their faith the understanding that humanity is essentially sinful, in that it will opt for the selfish choice most easily. We believe that salvation; healing and restoration with God and one another cannot come about through mere human effort. A place in heaven cannot be earned.

It is for this reason that God was born in our midst through Jesus Christ, so that the way and the means for salvation might be provided for all of us. In Jesus' life, he opted for the self-less choice every time: He put the world first.

Jesus challenged selfishness and hollow religious ritual. He questioned power structures and ways we oppress other people for our own benefit. Jesus not only walked a life of peace, service and love, but he also pointed out what was wrong in the way we lived. Because of this he became a big threat, to the point that Jesus was put on trial, and sentenced to be crucified.

The death of Jesus the "God-man" on a cross is a central belief of Christians that sets us apart from other faith-groups who hold Jesus up in esteem. However it is from this topsy-turvy state of powerlessness, that power to transform death itself comes. Jesus, being sinless (having been obedient to the will of God throughout his life) was a perfect sacrifice. It could be said that death could not keep Jesus dead!

The resurrection of Jesus from the dead on the first Easter Day is the celebration of how death itself has been transformed, so that there is now nothing that can separate us from the love of God.

SCRIPTURES AND WORSHIP

The most important Scriptural texts of the Christian are to be found in a collection of 66 books known as the Holy Bible. 39 of these books are the Hebrew/Jewish Scriptures, which Christians call the Old Testament. The remaining 27 form the New Testament. The original languages of these two collections of books were Hebrew and Greek respectively, although these days the Bible has been translated into a vast number of languages, so that it is possible to read the Christian Scriptures in one's own everyday tongue.

There are many different types of book in the Bible, ranging from history to story, from poetry to letter. The life of Jesus is to be found in the four Gospels (which means Good News) named after their authors: Matthew, Mark, Luke and John.

One of the earliest Christians, whose name was St Paul, wrote several letters included in the New Testament, which powerfully described how through Jesus Christ, ALL that divides us from one another and God, has been totally removed.

St Paul said this:

"Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall trouble or hardship or persecution or famine or nakedness or sword?

No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who saved us. For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord."

Romans 8:35-39

Worship in the various Christian traditions is in essence, a way of saying thank you to God for this gift that St Paul describes. "Salvation", having been achieved through God's initiative, enables the Christian to embrace the challenge to live a life that demonstrates this unconditional love that God has shown for us.

Putting it another way, worshipping is our response to God, who reaches his hands out to us. By worshipping, we place our hands back into His, so that we can walk together from then on. There are no real templates that say ALL Christians must worship in this or that way, but:

living a life that loves and cares for others;
singing hymns of Praise and songs of Devotion;
reading the Bible;
hearing teaching on Christian living;
praying and
remembering Jesus Christ's own self-giving in the Holy Communion service

are all-important components of Christian worship.

MILESTONES

The journey we travel through life is not just a journey *for* God and *towards* God, but is a life *with* God as well. When Jesus returned to heaven after His resurrection from the dead, the Holy Spirit filled the friends of Jesus whom he left behind. All who said "yes" to the good news of God's embracing love through Jesus, from then on, would have that same spark of God in their hearts too.

He helps us to opt for the right choices, and to love in the unconditional and selfless ways that Jesus loves. This is something that Christians seek to do from the earliest days of their lives and at various milestones along the way, would promise to live such a life to the best of their abilities.

Birth

Many Christians initiate their newborn children into the life of the Church, through the Baptism service. This is a service that involves promising to follow Jesus Christ; living a life that is Jesus-oriented and seeking to grow in the Christian traditions.

There are some other Christians who would mark the birth of a child by a service of Thanksgiving and Dedication, which would allow for the child to be baptised later on, when s/he could make the promises independently.

Marriage

Christian marriage is all about the giving of one person to another, who is witnessed by the two families and the community - it is a very public occasion. The phrase "two becoming one" is an important phrase in the marriage service, which is presided over by the minister or priest. It is normal these days for Christians to be monogamous.

Death

When a Christian dies, it is believed that the soul of that person leaves the body and joins God. The funeral service therefore is a service that enables family and friends to say goodbye to the deceased who has gone to be with God, and to bury or burn the body that is left. There are no stipulations favouring cremation or burial - Christians practise both, though some Christian traditions prefer not to cremate.

DIET

There are no food rules in Christianity: it is left to the individual to choose whether they will be vegetarian or not. Some Christians still however keep certain rules, like eating fish only on Fridays, fasting at certain times in the year (Lent, Advent, Holy Days, before Holy Communion) and not drinking alcohol. It is not widespread though.

LANGUAGES

Christianity is a global religion, and the importance of being able to worship in the vernacular is seen as a top priority in most churches. Although Latin used to be the liturgical language in the Church, it is used much less these days. English is the norm for the vast majority of Christians in this country, although a Punjabi Christian fellowship would of course use Punjabi!

FESTIVALS

Christian festivals have varying levels of importance, depending on which denomination or tradition one is thinking about. To some, there may be something to celebrate, something to think about, and someone to remember, on every day of the year. To others, the only day that matters is Sunday, and there are no other real festival times at all. Most Christians live somewhere in between these two extremes.

(1) Advent, Christmas and Epiphany

The Christian year begins at the beginning of December, with the season of Advent. This is a month of penitence and preparation before the festival of Christmas on the 25th December, which celebrates the birth of Jesus in Bethlehem. A festival called Epiphany comes shortly after Christmas (12 days after), and celebrates variously, the visit of the Wise Men (Magi) to Jesus, the baptism of Jesus and the first miracle of Jesus (turning water into wine at a wedding).

(2) Lent, Holy Week and Easter

Sometime in the early Spring (depending on when Easter is, which is set by some obscure formula involving the position of the moon at a certain time), Lent happens. This is a period of 40 days of special observance. Some people fast, some give something up; some pray more - it's very much up to the individual what one does during Lent. But Lent leads up to the central focus of the Christian year - Holy Week. This begins with Palm Sunday, commemorating Jesus' entry into Jerusalem on a donkey. Maundy Thursday recalls the Last Supper that Jesus had with his friends. Good Friday is the day of remembering the death of Jesus on the cross. Easter Day is on the third day after Good Friday, and celebrates the resurrection of Jesus from the dead.

The Ascension of Jesus into heaven happens 40 days after Easter Day. On the 50th day (7 Sundays after Easter) the festival of Pentecost is celebrated. This used to be the Jewish Harvest festival, but is it remembered in the Church as the time when God sent his Holy Spirit as a helper. Another old name for Pentecost is Whitsun. The Sunday following Pentecost is known as Trinity Sunday.

There are many other days that are important to some, and of little importance to others. Some of these are Saints Days, but there are also others, like Harvest Festival and Remembrance Sunday, which many people in the community join in with, whether or not they are normally part of the church.

LOCAL PLACES OF WORSHIP

These are very numerous and of many different varieties! They are mostly identified by titles involving words like: Church, Chapel, Fellowship, Tabernacle, Minster, Abbey or Cathedral. The main denominations we come across are:

Church of England/Anglican
Roman Catholic
Methodist
United Reformed
Baptist
Various sorts of Pentecostal groups
Orthodox

There are however, a rich variety of flavours of worship even within one denomination, and there are some others not mentioned above.

AFTERWORD

Since Jesus Christ walked the earth, there have been 2000 years of tumultuous history, and many libraries full of large books (many with small print!) trying to describe what Christianity is all about, which makes this small attempt look rather over-general!

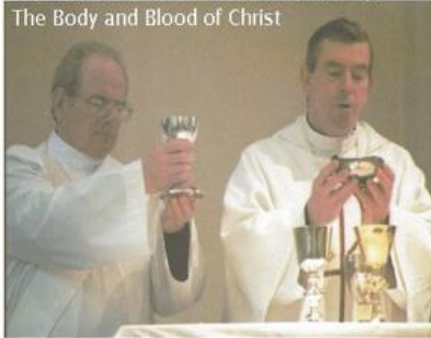
There remain huge divisions and barriers that need not be there, amongst different groups of people - even within the Church. The challenge to love as Jesus loves still remains, maybe more than ever. When we achieve such a level of selflessness and service that means that our love is purely for the benefit of someone else, then the Kingdom of God, which Jesus talked about so much, will be firmly established in this world.

Images of Christianity

Mount Shiloh



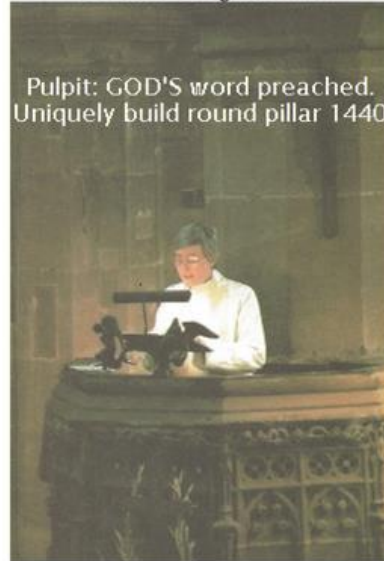
SS Peter & Paul Roman Catholic Church



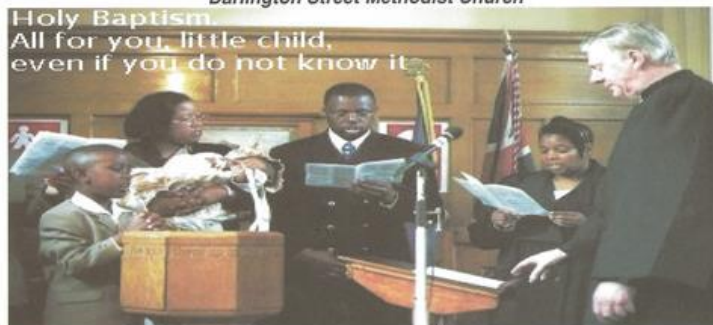
St. Columba's United Reformed Church



St. Peter's Collegiate Church



Darlington Street Methodist Church

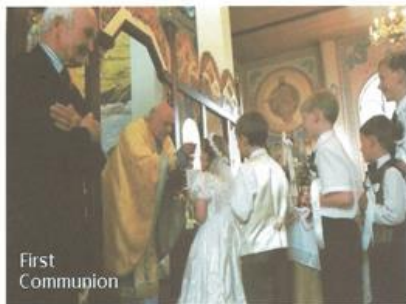


Images of Christianity



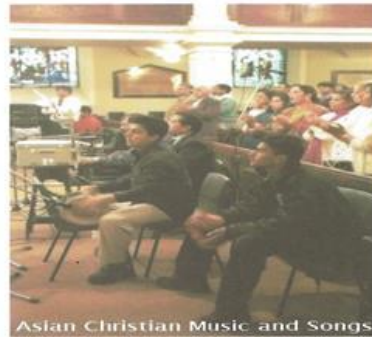
The Young People's Choir

Seventh Day Adventist Church Choristers

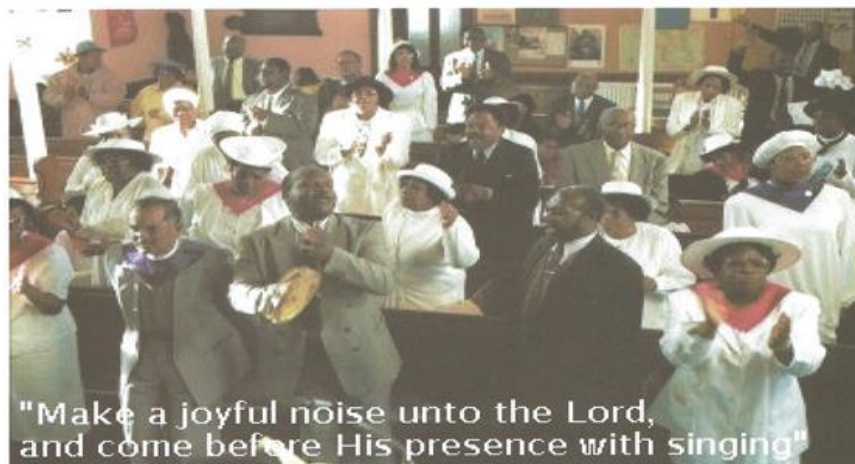


First
Communion

Particular Ukrainian Catholic Church



Asian Christian Music and Songs
Asian Christian Fellowship



"Make a joyful noise unto the Lord,
and come before His presence with singing"

African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church, Ettingshall

HINDUISM



BACKGROUND

There are just over 760 million Hindus in the world, most of them in India, but also in many other countries such as Nepal, Bali, Britain, Canada and America. Although Hinduism is one of the largest religious groups of the world, it is impossible to define it in precise statements. Unlike Islam and Christianity, Hinduism had no single founder. Nor does it have a single scripture upon which its beliefs and core practices are based.

To many Hindus, their faith is *sanatan dharma*, which means "the eternal way of life", and which has grown in the Indian sub-continent over a period of at least three thousand years.

Many Hindus believe that the origins of their faith lie beyond human history, and that its truths have been divinely revealed (*shruti*) and passed down through the ages to the present day in the most ancient of the world's scriptures the Vedas.

There are a wide variety of beliefs held by Hindus; there is no single doctrine or practice, which is subscribed to by all of them. For example, although temples (*mandirs*) are found in almost all towns and villages in the Indian sub-continent, there is no requirement for Hindus to visit a temple for their prayers. Similarly, there is no single devotional perspective or way of worship. Unlike many other religions, Hinduism has not made attempts to convert followers of other faiths.

The Hindus who live in Wolverhampton have mostly originated from India and East Africa. A large number of Hindus here have roots in the Gujarat State of India, although there are also significant numbers of Hindus from the Punjab.

A notable feature of Hinduism is its capacity to accommodate to and even absorb external influences. It is because of this adaptability and receptivity that despite many attacks on India by outsiders, the Hindu traditions have remained unbroken to the present day.

CORE BELIEFS

Dharma is one of the basic beliefs of Hinduism. There is no equivalent word in English. Dharma is tradition, duty, customs all rolled into one. When a Westerner says a certain thing "just isn't done", a Hindu would say that to do such a thing "would break dharma."

Hindus believe that all human beings live not one life, but a series of lives on earth. The human soul remains the same but passes through any number of bodies, which it wears out, much as old clothes are worn out. This process of rebirth is described graphically in the Bhagvad Gita:

"Just as a man abandons his old clothes and puts on new ones, the embodied self abandons its old bodies and goes to new ones". (Chapter 2, verse 22)

The idea of rebirth links all living beings in one fellowship, so that harming anything living, not only a human being can be regarded as an injury to a fellow being.

Many Hindu texts say that all living beings are different forms of one being, or that God is present in all forms; we should therefore have equal respect for all beings, high or low, animal or human. The link that exists between all living beings is called the **samsara**.

The body that the soul lives in during the next life depends on one's actions in this life. One's actions are held to affect one's destiny in the future. By doing good actions – that is, actions according to one's dharma – one gets good fortune in this life and future births. This cause and effect chain is called the law of **karma**.

Freedom from this cycle of births and deaths can be achieved through several ways:

- Through spiritual knowledge attaining enlightenment
- Through devotion – through loving God totally with one's heart.
- Through the path of duty, which means selflessly serving one's fellow human beings and dedicating oneself to the good of society.

The Hindus worship various gods and goddess. There are three main gods, Brahma (the creator), Vishnu (the preserver) and Shiva (the destroyer). These three gods are regarded as three aspects of the one all pervading, omnipresent, omniscient and omnipotent God. There are a number of mother goddesses in different forms, such as Kali (goddess of destruction), Saraswati (patron goddess of learning), Lakshmi (goddess of wealth), Durga (goddess of benign justice and power).

Many Hindus believe in the equality of all religions as pathways to God. For them, there are no heathens. They are of the view that most religions share the same core of truth; they differ only in externals.

SCRIPTURES AND WORSHIP

A famous Indian scholar S Radhakrishnan says, "For millions of Hindus, it does not matter what conception of God we adopt so long as we keep up a perpetual search after truth." It follows; therefore, there are a wide variety of scriptures and ways of worship among Hindus.

Hindus believe that the divine manifested itself through the truths revealed to early sages. Scriptures in which those truths are recorded are called **Shruti**. There is another category of scriptures, called **Smriti**, which includes sacred texts 'remembered' or 'handed down'.

The Vedas and Upanishad form the shruti literature and are said to have been divinely revealed. There are four collections, which comprise the Vedas. They are Rig Veda, Sama Veda, Yajur Veda, and Atharve Veda. The first three contain hymns and mantras; the fourth, rituals. These are the earliest known Hindu scriptures. The word **Upnishads** means 'sitting near' and implies that these texts were taught by a sage to a disciple. Examples of Smriti scriptures are two epics **the Ramayana** and **the Mahabharata**. The latter includes the Bhagvad Gita. The two epics are long poems, which narrate episodes in the lives of great warriors. Rama appears in the first; Krishna has a critical role in the second.

All Hindus have a profound respect for **the Bhagvad Gita** as it contains the core beliefs regarding transmigration of soul and karma.

For most Hindus, worship (often referred to as **puja**) is an integral part of their faith. The majority of Hindu homes will have a shrine where family prayers are offered. Performing puja involves making an offering to God, and having a **darshana** – having a view of the deity. Much Hindu worship is an act performed by individuals. It must be remembered that a temple is not a church; it is not a place for congregational worship, but the dwelling place of a god or goddesses to which the individual worshipper comes to pay respects.

Prior to worship, purification is necessary through ritual cleansing and the removal of leather items, including shoes. Meat and alcohol are never consumed in Hindu temples.

MILESTONES

The ideal Hindu' existence follows the "four stages of life:

- First stage is that of a student, when a student is supposed to study and undergo religious rites.
- Second stage is marrying and raising one's family. The primary responsibility is to provide for his family.
- Third stage is when a Hindu may leave home to devote himself to religious practices and experiences. Some sects within Hinduism do not demand that a man leave home in this stage.
- At the final stage, he prepares for death and renounces all worldly possessions. Most Hindus follow only the first two stages.

Birth

Special ceremonies are performed before the baby is born for the welfare of the mother and child. The family priest or **pundit** will come to the family's home to perform various rites. The naming ceremony takes place ten days after the baby is born. Hindu names are usually chosen because they have a special meaning.

Marriage

In traditional Hindu society, most marriages are arranged by parents. Their view is that marriage is between families, rather than individuals. It is monogamous and normally within the caste. Partners must not be too closely related. As a rule of thumb, you must not marry someone with a common grandparent. Many young people break out of the system of arranged marriages. A Hindu wedding is usually a big family occasion with its own rituals and considerable hospitality arranged by the bride's parents.

Death

After death, the Hindu priest is called to give his blessing to the deceased. The body is taken to the crematorium by the relatives and friends usually led by the eldest son. After cremation (burials are not allowed except in the case of infants), the ashes are ceremoniously sprinkled, with due religious rites, into flowing water, preferably in the Ganges river in India, if at all possible.

DIET

Generally, devout Hindus are vegetarians and meat is not eaten. Those who do eat meat do not eat beef, as the cow is a particularly sacred animal. Orthodox Hindus do not drink alcohol; this applies particularly to women. In south Asian countries, by tradition women tend not to smoke or drink alcohol. The main food consists of chapatti, peas, beans, lentils and other vegetables, milk, yoghurt, cooking oil, ghee (clarified butter) and fruit. Worship rituals include an offering of food to gods and food, which is shared out after offering it to the god, is called **prashad**.

LANGUAGE/S

Those who originate from Gujarat speak Gujarati or Hindi, in the main. Hindus who have migrated from Punjab speak Punjabi. In the case of East Africans Hindus, especially parents who have migrated here may additionally speak Swahili. Most Hindu scriptures are written in Sanskrit or Hindi. Sanskrit is not a spoken language anywhere in India or elsewhere.

Example of Hindi

तुलवरहैम्पटन इंटरफेथ ग्रुप स्थानीय भाईचारे के साथ मिलजुल कर कार्य करना चाहता है ।

FESTIVALS

As with other religions, Hindus celebrate important religious events or stories, which help shape and direct their life. In different parts of India, local customs and traditions play a large role in the celebration of different festivals. Some of the Hindu festivals are listed below:

Diwali is probably the most important festival celebrated by Hindus and takes place around October/November. Diwali means a 'row of lights' and symbolises the victory of good over evil. Diwali celebrates the triumphant return of Prince Rama to his kingdom after defeating the demon king Ravana who had earlier captured Rama's wife Sita. The story expresses the struggles with evil that all must undergo before they can truly follow God.

Lights are also lit to invite the goddess Lakshmi, the goddess of fortune and prosperity, into Hindu homes and lives

During Diwali, Hindus visit friends, exchange presents and special sweets (often made of milk, coconut and nuts). They light lamps and have fireworks.

Dussehra (September/October) celebrates the victory of King Rama over Ravana. Troupes of players tour the villages performing Ram Lila, plays based on the Ramayana story. The climax of the festival is the burning of a huge firework-filled effigy of Ravana.

Holi is another Hindu festival, which takes place during February and March. It is celebrated to herald Spring and coincides with the time of the spring harvest. Holi is a playful and boisterous affair in India and people squirt coloured waters and powders at one another.

Raksha Bandhan takes place in July/August. Raksha means 'protection' and bandhan means 'to tie'. Girls and married women tie a rakhi (amulet) on the right wrists of brothers, wishing them protection from evil influences of various kinds. In return the girls receive cash and gifts.

Some other Hindu festivals are: **Shivaratri** (January/February) to honour Lord Shiva who is said to perform the cosmic dance of creation, preservation and destruction on this night, **Navratri** (October) devoted to the mother goddess Devi, and **Janamashtmi**, (August/September), which celebrates the birth of Krishan who is identified as a manifestation of God in *the Bhagvad Gita*.

LOCAL PLACES OF WORSHIP:

Hindu Sabha and Shree Krishan Mandir
123 Penn Road
Wolverhampton
WV3 0DR

The Secretary

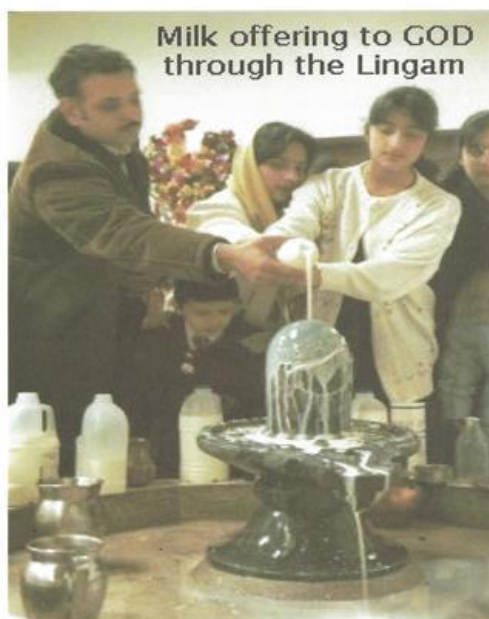
Shree Durga Bhawan
Wellington Road
Bilston
Wolverhampton

The Secretary

**Bhagwan Valmik Temple (ASHRAM)
and Community Centre**
Cable Street
Off Steelhouse Lane
Wolverhampton
Wv2 2HX

The Secretary

Images of Hindus at Worship



Krishna and Consort



Shree Krishan Mandir, Penn Road.



The Gujarati Association ~ Worship with Tamba

ISLAM



INTRODUCTION.

The religion of Islam is in essence the same message and guidance, which God revealed to all His Prophets prior to Muhammad (Peace be unto Him - Pbuh). The same message was, in its Comprehensive, Complete and final form, revealed by God to Muhammad (Pbuh), the last and final Prophet. Islam is, therefore not a new religion, it originated with the creation of man and is a continuation of the religion, revealed by God to all the Prophets (Peace be upon them all) before Muhammad (Pbuh) in the seventh century C.E.

Muslims are those who freely and willingly accept the Supreme Power of God and submit and surrender completely to Him through the acceptance and practice of the Qur'an and the Tradition (Sunnah) of the Prophet Muhammad (Pbuh) in their daily life. Through His revelation in the Qur'an God has given mankind total guidance for all aspects of social, economic, political, moral and spiritual life.

BACKGROUND.

Islam places extreme importance on religion in the life of human beings even in today's world of materialism. Life has a definite purpose and religion or faith helps a Muslim to understand and make sense of it.

Looking at the natural world and recognizing order and perfection in it alone should make us reflect and acknowledge the Creator and serve him.

Muslims form the highest number of population in Britain, besides Christians, who, of course, form the vast majority. There are over one billion Muslims in the world today. They live in various countries and have different languages and customs, but all are guided through life by the teachings of the Qur'an and the Tradition (Sunnah) of the Prophet Muhammad (Pbuh). The entire life of the Muslim is governed by the teachings of the Qur'an and the Sunnah. An important rule for day-to-day living is that everything is lawful (halal) unless it is explicitly forbidden (haram) or would lead to the occurrence of something explicitly forbidden. Good intentions do not and cannot justify unlawful or unethical conduct.

In the words of Bishop Michael Nazir-Ali *"Islam took its rise not only in the seventh century of the Christian Era, but in an environment heavily influenced by Judaism and Christianity. From the very beginning there was considerable social and religious (even theological) interaction with Christianity"*.

THE ESSENCE OF ISLAM

Islam specifies two essential elements for its adherents:

Faith and Practice

Faith makes human beings aware of the meaningfulness of the universe and their place in it.

Faith consists of the following in Islam:

- To believe that there is only one God, who is the Creator of all things. Who is Omnipotent and Omniscient.
- To believe in all God's Messages (revealed books e.g. the Qur'an, the Bible, the Torah etc.)
- To believe in all God's Prophets and Messengers who delivered the messages.
- To believe in God's angels
- To believe that every human being will be accountable to Him alone on the Day of Judgement
- To believe in Qadar, God's pre-knowledge of human action.

A closer look at some of these basic principles of faith is important to understand Islam.

In the words of Faruqi and Faruqi:

"The essence of Islam is Tashhid, the act of affirming Allah to be the one absolute transcendent Creator, Lord and master of all that is".

They go on to say *"Traditionally and simply expressed, 'Tashhid is the conviction and witnessing that there is no God but God! This negative statement, brief to the utmost limits and brevity, carries the greatest and richest meanings in the whole of Islam.'"*

Tashhid teaches Muslims to see God not only as one but the whole of mankind as one human family.

In the words of Jabal Buaben, *"There is one Creator, one World, one Revelation. Prophet hood is one, the world is one and humanity is one."*

The concept of Tashhid only makes sense if the above-mentioned propositions are true, this is why in the Islamic Testimony of Faith one says, 'There is no Deity worthy of worship except Allah and Muhammad (Pbuh) is His Messenger'. By saying these words a Muslim totally commits himself/herself to the propositions mentioned above. This is essentially the reason why the Qur'an makes it obligatory for Muslims to believe in all prophets and messengers, because they all come from the same one God."

Thus the Qur'an calls itself *"A confirmation of what has gone before you,"* meaning a reminder of what God has already revealed.

It is precisely for this reason that the Qur'an demands that all the messengers of God are to be accepted with the basic understanding that there is only one Creator or God who sent all of them and therefore their mission is essentially the same. The Qur'an emphasises the paramount importance of life hereafter for mankind. It inculcates the concept of accountability both in the private and public life of a person:

Let us now turn to the other element - **Practice**

"The practise and observation of duties are" in the words of Riadh El-Droubie are summarised in 'Five Pillars'. These five pillars of practice are intended to purify the personality. To regulate human relations with God and society, and to encourage the doing of good for the sake of God alone."

The first of these pillars, *Tashhid* or *Shahadah* (the statement of Faith) we have already dealt with in the previous section – which is bearing witness in words and deeds that there is no Deity worthy of worship except God and that Muhammad (Pbuh) is His Messenger. This should be reflected in every moment of the day in the life of a Muslim.

The second pillar is *Salat*: The prayer – which is mental, physical and spiritual submission to the will of God. Prayer has to be performed in a proscribed form and under certain conditions as assigned to it by the Prophet Muhammad (Pbuh) and it has to be acted upon at certain times of the day facing the Ka'abah, the sacred Mosque at Makka. The prayers are preceded by ablution (*Wadhu*).

The first compulsory prayer is between dawn and sunrise, the second one is early afternoon, the third one mid-afternoon, the fourth one is just after sunset and the fifth one is at night – usually before midnight.

Prayer times vary according to the length of the day. In the midst of daily activities, Prayer comes as a regular reminder of our relationship with God, our place in the scheme of things, our responsibilities and ultimate destination. Prayer is a regular means of purifying both the body and soul.

The third pillar is *Zakat*: welfare contribution.

The Arabic word *Zakat* means purifying. It offers the donor the inner satisfaction and reward in this world and the next. *Zakat* is an obligation on each and every Muslim who possesses more than he/she needs to give a specified portion (2.5% of the savings, cash or kind) for the relief of the poor and the needy. Islam teaches people that the poor and the deprived have an entitlement to the wealth of the rich. It must be understood that *Zakat* is neither tax nor a charity; rather it is a 'loan' to God.

The fourth pillar is *Sawm*: Fasting. Every year, for one complete lunar month, Ramadan, in the Islamic calendar – adult Muslims all over the world are required to fast from dawn to sunset. Fasting involves total abstinence during this period from food, drink, smoking and conjugal relationships. Travellers and the sick can defer fasting during Ramadan but must make up for it at a later stage.

A Muslim saint says, "*Sawm develops self-control and helps us to overcome selfishness, greed, laziness and other faults. It is an annual training programme to refresh us for carrying out our duties towards Allah, the creator and Sustainer. Sawm gives us the feeling of hunger and thirst. We experience for ourselves what it is like to have an empty stomach. This develops our feeling for the poor and hungry people. Fasting teaches us to control the love of comfort.*"

The fifth pillar is *Haji*: Pilgrimage. It is a visit to Al-Ka'abah, the house of Allah in Makka at least once in a lifetime by those Muslims who can afford it, both physically and financially. At this Annual International Muslim Assembly when Islamic brotherhood becomes particularly evident, barriers of language, territory, colour and race disappear – and the bond of faith becomes uppermost.

In addition to the five pillars, Islam lays down some other obligations on the Muslims. The Qur'an forbids immoral acts such as perjury or slander, consumption of the flesh of pigs, the drinking of alcohol, the practice of usury, gambling and sexual relationships outside marriage.

THE ISLAMIC CALENDAR

The Muslim calendar is a lunar one, having 12 months, which are counted from one new moon to the next. The Islamic era originates from the 'emigration' (hijrah) of the Prophet Muhammad (Pbuh) from Makka to Medina in the year 622 C.E. The most important month for the Muslim is the month of Ramadan, the ninth month of the Muslim lunar year. As has been mentioned before, observance of fasting during the whole of Ramadan is the fourth pillar of Islam. Ramadan is associated with the greatest of events in the history of Islam, the start of the revelation of the Qur'an to the prophet Muhammad (Pbuh) at the time forty years of age.

Amongst other significant events that occurred during this month, the most important one was the conquest of Makka. The month of Ramadan is also a month of forgiveness and charity. It is obligatory for the Muslims to pay *Zakat-ul-fitr*, which is a charity given, as an act of purification for every single member of the family, before the congregational prayer at the end of the period of fasting and on the day of the festival of Eid.

The observance of Ramadan may vary from country to country, from one place to another but the objective remains the same everywhere: the fulfilment of God's commands of discipline, piety and collective worship.

FESTIVALS

There are only two most important festivals in Islam, which are celebrated as acts of religious duties as stated in the five pillars of Islam. The first one is **Eid-ul-Fitr**, the Festival of Breaking the Fast of Ramadan, and the second one is **Eid-ul-Adha**, the Festival of Sacrifice at the end of Hajj, the pilgrimage to Makka.

Both festivals are occasions for celebration and rejoicing in God's favour for His revelation of the Qur'an. Eid-ul-Fitr is also an occasion for thanksgiving by individuals for having the strength to complete the fast and thus to fulfil their duty, and Eid-ul-Adha is an occasion for thanksgiving by individuals for having been able to make the pilgrimage and the sacrifice. In the words of Riyadh El-Droubie *"Muslims on the occasion of Eid-ul-Adha reaffirm their faith in the Qur'an and the Tradition, and show their willingness to surrender their own interests and worldly belongings to God."*

THE PLACE OF THE QUR'AN AND SUNNAH (TRADITION) IN ISLAM.

The Qur'an and Sunnah guide a Muslim's life. The Qur'an is the revelation and the Sunnah is the interpretation as lived and explained by the Prophet Muhammad (Pbuh).

The pursuit of knowledge is therefore given a high priority in Islam. As Islam is a complete way of life, and not simply a set of rituals, and a Muslim must live in total obedience to the Creator, the development of the whole person is imperative. Education in Islam always involves moral teachings, which derive not only from human consciousness but also have a very firm religious/spiritual root, the aim being the production of a good human being.

The original and complete text of the Qur'an, which is unchanged to date, is available to everybody in Arabic, the language in which it was revealed. Translations and interpretations of the Qur'an into many languages are widely used and available.

Arabic

مجموعه رابطه بين المكاتب ولوريميثن تمنى ان بعمل
بالاشتراك مع المنظمات المحليه

CONCLUSION

Islam is a practical and flexible religion, which lays great emphasis on family values and responsibilities. It encourages simplicity, modesty, charity and mutual help and co-operation. It discourages miserliness, corruption, dishonesty, greed, extravagance and unnecessary waste. It does not recognise any discrimination on the grounds of language, colour, territory, gender or class. Islam recognises the preference of one over the other only on the basis of 'Taqira', which is piety or obedience to God. One who obeys Allah most is considered the nobles in Islam. This obedience to Allah has to be demonstrated in public as well as private life by fulfilling all responsibilities assigned to the person to the best of his/her abilities, with total integrity, honesty and sincerity. Any deviation is sinful in the eyes of Islam. Muslims are conscious of the inter-relatedness and inter-dependence of the human family and must therefore seek, cherish, and indeed uphold the fundamental principle of being an agent of peace in society. The Qur'an constantly calls on the believers to promote the consciousness of doing good and avoiding evil. Islam emphasises the cause of social responsibility of Muslims to all people, irrespective of their religious faith or no faith. Muslims believe that as fallible human beings they are unwittingly (or perhaps sometimes intentionally) committing sins most of their life. They also believe that God has given them the avenue of repentance – true and sincere repentance. Probably God loves a truly repentant sinner more than one who commits no sin at all.

The true balance of an Islamic life is established by having a health fear of God as well as a sincere belief in his infinite mercy. Muslims believe that life is a test and ultimately, all human beings will be judged by God for their beliefs and actions in this world. However, in judging human beings God will be both merciful and just, and people will only be judged for what they were capable of.

Local Places of Worship:

**Jamia Masjid Bilal and
Muslim Community Centre**
58 Newhampton Road West
Wolverhampton WV6 0RU
Tel: 752190

The Secretary

Muslim Educational Trust
187 Lime Street
Pennfields
Wolverhampton

The Secretary

Madina Masjid
U K Islamic Mission
213 Newhampton Road East
Wolverhampton
WV1 4BB

Contact:

715887/323756

Islamic Society of Britain (ISB)

Mr Zahid Parvez
41 Albert Road
Wolverhampton
WV6 0AG
Tel: 715887/323756

Wolverhampton Mosque
197 Waterloo Road
Wolverhampton
WV1 4RA
Tel: 312232

The Secretary

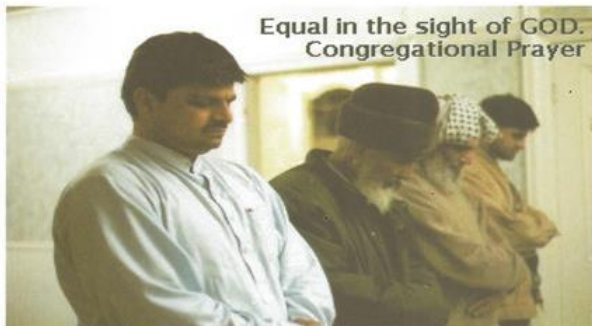
**Hussaini I.M. Ali (AS) Mosque
& Shia Muslim Community and Welfare Centre**
283 Newhampton Road West
Whitmore Reans
Wolverhampton WV6 0RS
Tel: 751593

The Secretary

Muslims at Prayer



*Sura al Fatiha
Members of the congregation, Jamia Masjid Bilal, Newhampton Road.*



**Equal in the sight of GOD.
Congregational Prayer**

*UK Islamic Mission
Newhampton Road East*

*Worship Prostration
Wolverhampton Mosque
Waterloo Road*



JAINISM



BACKGROUND

Jainism is one of the oldest religions of the world. Followers of "JINA" are called Jains. **Jinas** literally means 'conquerors' and symbolise those people who have conquered all desires and have attained knowledge and wisdom. The Jain prophets who have laid down the path for the spiritual uplift of humanity are known as **Tirthankars**.

There are 24 **Tirthankars**. The first Tirthankar was Rishabh Dev whose name is also mentioned in the Vedas. Another notable **Tirthankar**, number 22, is regarded as the originator of the Adhyatma Veda and a benefactor of all living beings. **Bhagwan (Lord) Mahavir** is the 24th Tirthankar.

CORE BELIEFS

Jainism is founded on three principles:

AHIMSA – Non-violence,
SANYAM – self-control
TAP – penance/meditation

Jains place considerable emphasis on (i) acquiring the right knowledge, (ii) having the right faith, and (iii) undertaking the right conduct.

SCRIPTURES AND WORSHIP

Lord Mahavir's teachings are written in books called **AGAMS**. There are 32 Agams, written in the Prakrit, Pali and Sanskrit languages. Translated versions of Agams are available in several languages.

The most significant Agam is called **Utradyan Sutra**.

All Jain monks and nuns are required to undertake the following six vows:

To observe Ahimsa (non-violence) at all times.
To speak the truth,
Not to steal anything or from anyone,
Not to be greedy,
To exercise rigorous sexual control, and
Not to consume any food or drink after sunset.

There are more than 10,000 Jain temples in India. There are a few very holy temples, which every Jain is expected to visit at least once in his/her lifetime. They are Palitana and Mount Girnar in Gujarat and Pavapur and Samets Kikarji in Bihar. Some of the other famous temples are Mount Abu and Ranakpur in Rajasthan and Bahu Bali in South India.

Images of Jain Worship



Display of 14
dreams when
Bhagwan
Mahavir Swami
was in
Mata Trishla's
tummy



Jain Service –
Young girl making
an offering



*Jain Nuns (centre)
visiting
Wolverhampton
Inter Faith Group
Offices*

JUDAISM



HISTORY.

Judaism has been in existence for over five and a half thousand years. Abraham was the first Jew after G-d revealed himself to him. There are around 13 million Jews in the world, 6 million in Israel and 300,000 in the UK.

The term Jewish can mean many different things. It is an ethnic and cultural, as well as religious label. In the British Jewish community there are many different groups, degrees of religious observance and a wide spectrum of belief. Some Jews are secular and have no religious beliefs and requirements.

The land of Israel is considered a Jewish homeland.

BELIEFS.

Religious Jews believe and worship one G-d. G-d cannot be represented in any shape or form and is known only through personal relationship.

G-d is said to be merciful and just; it is humankind's purpose on earth to serve G-d, live justly, perform good deeds and to study.

PRACTICE.

Jews practice the worship of G-d, carrying out the Ten Commandments and charity and tolerance towards fellow human beings.

Orthodox Jews follow a traditional interpretation of the *torah* and are usually more observant of religious and dietary laws than non-Orthodox Jews (including liberal, progressive and reform) who seek a modern Jewish interpretation of the ancient laws. The *torah* or law is way of life and it is inaccurate to view it as a set of legalistic restrictions.

SACRED TEXTS.

The holy books are what Christians refer to as the Old Testament of the Bible. The most important are the first five books, known as the *Torah* or *Pentateuch* – the Five Books of Moses and are known as the Written Law. The Torah can be read in book form and in the synagogue is written as a scroll, made out of leather parchment. This, the word of G-d, is the most holy object to be found there.

The Oral Law is a detailed commentary on the Written Law by distinguished Rabbis and has been compiled over centuries.

LANGUAGE.

Jews pray in Hebrew and speak the language of the country where they were born and live.

הָלוֹא אֵב אֶחָד לְכִלְנוּ?
הָלוֹא אֵל אֶחָד בְּרָאנוּ?

SABBATH, FESTIVALS AND FASTS.

The Jewish calendar is dictated by the lunar cycle.

The Sabbath (Shabbat) is of great importance to most Jews. It is a "day of rest" centred around synagogue services, studying texts, and the family. Sabbath begins before nightfall on Friday afternoon and ends with the sighting of three stars on Saturday night. On the Sabbath work is prohibited; work includes writing, travelling, switching on lights and electrical appliances, cooking, cleaning and handling money. The food served on Shabbat is as much a celebration of the day as going to the synagogue.

There are festivals throughout the year that have both a spiritual and historic significance. These are:

Rosh Hashana – The New Year.

The beginning of the High Holy Days, commemorating the creation of man, and the completion of the creation of the world. At this time until the end of the Day of Atonement, Jews reflect on their deeds during the past year and through prayer, penitence and charity attempt to attain forgiveness for wrongdoings.

Yom Kippur – The Day of Atonement.

A 25-hour fast day to focus on the request to the Almighty for forgiveness.

Succot.

The festival of Tabernacles, during which meals are taken in a temporary booth erected for the purpose, reminding Jews of the time when they lived in the desert before they reached the Promised Land. The festival also marks the autumn harvest and the last day of it celebrates the annual completion of the reading from the Torah scroll.

Chanukah.

Festival of Lights, which lasts for eight days commemorating the overthrow of the Greeks and rededication of the Temple by the Hasmoneans. On the first night one candle is lit in the eight-branched menorah (candelabra) and each subsequent night one more is added until all eight are lit.

New Year for Trees.

A minor festival to mark the end of the winter and the beginning of growth in trees and plants, celebrated by the custom of eating 15 fruits.

Purim.

Festival of Lots, commemorating the salvation of the Jews of Persia by Queen Esther and Mordechai from annihilation as told in the Book of Esther, which is read on this day.

Passover.

An eight-day festival, which commemorates the exodus of the Jews from Egypt. Marked by the eating of unleavened bread (matza) and leaven free food. A special service (seder) is held at home to tell the story of the miraculous events which led to the Jews leaving Egypt.

Yom Ha'atzmaut – Independence Day.

The celebration of the birth of the State of Israel in 1948.

Shavuot.

A celebration of the anniversary of the narration of the 10 Commandments. An early harvest festival, it is traditionally celebrated with the eating of dairy foods.

Fast of Tammuz.

A fast day (from dawn to dark) held to mark the initial breaches in the outer walls of the city of Jerusalem on two separate occasions. Three weeks later come the ...

Feast of Av.

A full fast (25 hours), which commemorates the Destruction of the two Temples on the same day in 586 BCE and 70 CE.

DRESS.

Men are required to cover their heads when praying, usually with a skullcap or hat. Jewish women are required to dress modestly. Orthodox women will often have their hair covered.

DIET.

The dietary Laws are laid down in the Torah and require Jews to only eat animals which eat grass and have a cloven hoof, fish that have both fins and scales, poultry which are not birds of prey and grains, fruits and vegetables. The animals and birds have to be killed in a specific way and then prepared so that as much of the blood has been removed, as blood is forbidden to Jews. Processed food has to be prepared in a special way according to Jewish Law (kosher) and meat and milk products cannot be eaten together.

rites of passage.**Birth.**

Boys are given their name 8 days after birth, if the baby is well and over 5 lbs in weight. Circumcision, which is a sign of the Covenant made between Abraham and G-d, is performed by a person trained to do this according to Jewish Law. There is no circumcision for girls, who are given their name in the synagogue on the first Sabbath after their birth.

Bar/Bat Mitzvah.

The age of 13 for boys and 12 for girls, is seen to be a spiritual 'coming of age' when young people can begin to have some spiritual responsibility and accountability. This is marked in the synagogue and accompanied by a celebration party.

Marriage.

Marriage is an important milestone for Jews, who are required to marry other Jews. For the very Orthodox, arranged introductions are desirable as contact between unmarried boys and girls is not appropriate.

The marriage ceremony takes place beneath a wedding canopy and the bridegroom gives his wife a ring and promises to look after her according to the laws of Moses. The purpose of marriage is to enable two people who have love, friendship and support between them to create a Jewish home and family.

Sex before marriage is forbidden and within marriage there are specific laws of family purity.

Dying, Death and Burial.

A dying person should not be left alone and families may wish to sit with their relatives during the last days or hours. The patient may wish to recite special Psalms or prayers, including a confession.

Once death has taken place, burial must take place as quickly as possible. The body is washed and prepared for burial by members of the Jewish Burial Society – women attend females and men attend males. Everyone is buried wearing the same white burial garments and in a simple wood coffin with no accessories. Burial takes place in a Jewish cemetery. Jewish law forbids cremation. Immediate family members have to cut a garment that they are wearing. After the funeral, the close family returns home and stays there for a week, sitting on low chairs and not having to be concerned with external affairs in order to begin the grieving process. Other family members and the community attend to their needs and pay consolation visits. Memorial Prayers are said in the home.

Local Places of Worship.

The Jewish place of worship is called a synagogue - a Greek word meaning a gathering. The nearest synagogues in the West Midlands are in Birmingham. Regular services are held in the three Orthodox* and one Progressive* Synagogues. Further information about the West Midlands Jewish Community can be found on the internet at www.brijnet.org/birmingham or by contacting 0121 643 2688.

** A brief description of the difference between Orthodox and Progressive Judaism is a difference in fundamental belief and resulting practice.*

Orthodox Judaism believes that all the Torah, which encompasses the 613 positive and negative commandments to be observed by Jews, was given to Moses at Mt. Sinai and cannot be changed. Progressive Judaism does not accept this and believes that the laws must be adapted to the times we live in.

SIKHISM



BACKGROUND

Sikhism is a relatively new religion as far as the world's major religions are concerned. Sikhism originated in India and Sikhs form around 2% of India's population. Most of them live in the State of Punjab, although substantial numbers of Sikhs are settled in different parts of India and in several other countries such as Britain, America and Canada. The majority of Asians – approximately 15,000 out of 28,000 - living in Wolverhampton are Sikhs.

Sikhism was founded by Guru Nanak, who was born in 1469 in a small village called Talwandi, which later came to be known as Nankana Sahib, now in Pakistan. His message was that true religion was nothing but the love of God, the love of human beings and truthful living. The succeeding nine Gurus developed his ideas and teachings.

The ten Sikh Gurus are as follows:

Guru Nanak Dev (1469-1539)
Guru Angad (1504-1552)
Guru Amar Das (1479-1574)
Guru Ram Das (1534-1581)
Guru Arjun (1563-1606)
Guru Hargobind (1595-1644)
Guru Hari Rai (1630-1661)
Guru Hari Krishan (1656-1664)
Guru Tegh Bahadur (1621-1675)
Guru Gobind Singh (1666-1708)

Guru Gobind Singh, the tenth Guru, installed Guru Granth Sahib, as the permanent Guru of the Sikhs. Sikhs, therefore, regard the Guru Granth Sahib, their holy book, as a living Guru.

Guru Nanak maintained that God alone was to be worshipped and that it was futile worshipping gods and goddesses. He preached that God should be worshipped in the spirit, by constantly meditating over His Name and feeling His presence in every place and all the time. The driving force of Sikhism is the belief in the unity of God and brotherhood of man.

CORE BELIEFS

God in Sikhism is the eternally unchanging Formless One. According to Guru Nanak, God is the creator and the sustainer of the universe. God's creation is real but it is not everlasting. Men become 'true' when they focus on the Name (*naam*) and the Word (*shabad*).

According to Sikhs, since God has no form, colour or material sign, He is revealed through the Word. Man can recognise Truth only through the help of a Guru, the divine guide and teacher. Without the help of a Guru, man wanders through the cycle of births and deaths. The recognition of divine order (*hukam, bhaana*) is essential, and so is submission to it.

The law of karma is not independent of God. It is believed that submission to God's *hukam* becomes a means to release from the 'law of karma'.

One of the essential beliefs in Sikhism is the belief in equality of humankind. Sikhs, therefore, do not believe in a caste system. Nor do they believe in idol-worship, or rituals or fasting.

Central to Sikhism are the beliefs in:

**Kirat karna,
Vand chhakna,
Naam japna, and
Seva karna.**

Kirat karna means Sikhs should earn their living by honest means, and not be deceitful for any personal gain. This is encapsulated in Guru Nanak's statement:

"Truth is higher than all, but higher still is true living." Sikhism consists of practical living, in rendering service to humanity and ensuring brotherly love towards all.

Vand chhakna means it is important to be charitable and share what we earn with those in need. What prevents the individual from uniting with God is their ego ('*haumai*'). Dominated by *haumai* and other sins such as lust, greed, anger and attachment to material things or people, a person never experiences the joy of the divine spark.

Naam japna is to recite God's name from the heart.

Seva karna requires Sikhs to undertake selfless community service for anyone in need of it. Seva can be seen in Langar halls (free kitchen at a Sikh Temple).

(N.B. A Sikh Temple can be pronounced as Gurudwara or Gurdwara. Free food (langar) is available from the community kitchen in a Sikh Temple)).

Initiated Sikhs wear five sacred symbols, commonly known as **five K's**, prescribed by Guru Gobind Singh. Each of them starts with the letter '**K**' in the Punjabi language.

1. **Kesh** or uncut natural hair is regarded as a symbol of saintliness and acceptance of God's will.
2. **Kangha** or the comb is necessary to keep the hair clean and tidy.
3. **Kara** or the steel bangle symbolises restraint from evil deeds.
4. **Kachha or kachhehra** or the shorts must be worn at all times reminding Sikhs of the need for self-restraint over passions and desires.
5. **Kirpan** or the sword is the symbol of courage and self-defence. It symbolises the readiness to defend the weak and the oppressed. According to Sikhs, the kirpan must never be drawn against anybody out of revenge.

The five K's, along with the turban, distinguish a Sikh from any other person in the world.

SCRIPTURES AND WORSHIP

The holiest book of the Sikhs is Guru Granth Sahib, which was compiled by the Guru Arjun, their fifth Guru. It is a collection of poetic compositions of Sikh Gurus and has contributions by numerous Hindu and Muslim saints. The tenth Guru, Gobind Singh made it his commandment that after his death, Sikhs should acknowledge the Granth Sahib as his successor, as a living Guru.

(N.B. Sahib or Ji are terms used to indicate respect).

No Sikh ceremony is regarded as complete unless it is performed in the presence of Guru Granth Sahib. The shrine, which houses the Guru Granth is called a **Gurudwara**, literally, a door (dwara) to ultimate enlightenment (guru). Many Sikhs keep the holy book in their homes, paying full respect by keeping it in a separate room. Sikhs bow in front of their Book with their heads covered and shoes removed. They stand in front of it in homage, or sit on the floor while the Guru Granth is always placed on a higher platform.

Mool Mantar is the opening verse of the Jap Ji Sahib, written by Guru Nanak and is the first hymn in the Guru Granth Sahib.

The English version of the Mool Mantar is as below:

There is One Being
Truth by Name
Primal Creator
Without Fear
Without enmity
Timeless in form
Unborn
Self-existent
The grace of the Guru

MEDITATE
Truth before time
Truth throughout time
Truth here and now
Says Nanak, Truth is evermore.

MILESTONES

All Sikh ceremonies like birth, initiation, marriage and death have a religious tone. They are held in the presence of Guru Granth Sahib and include Kirtan, the singing of appropriate hymns for the occasion, saying of Ardas, the formal prayer and the distribution of *Karah Parshad*, the holy food, to the congregation.

Birth

Soon after a child is born, prayers are offered in a Gurudwara or to Guru Granth Sahib asking for a special blessing of good health, long life and the Sikh way of life for the child.

After reciting Ardas, Guru Granth Sahib is opened at random. The first letter of the first word of the hymn on the left page is selected as the first letter of the child's name.

Sikh names are mostly common for either sex. The word Kaur meaning 'princess' or 'lioness' is added after a girl's name and the name Singh meaning 'lion' after a boy's name.

Marriage

Sikh marriages are usually arranged. However, this does not mean that a boy or a girl is forced into wedlock according to the parents' choice only. It is important to secure the agreement of the boy and the girl by mutual discussion before arrangements are finalised.

The Sikh marriage is monogamous. The marriage ceremony is called *Anand Karaj* ('ceremony of bliss'). Holy wedding hymns called '*lavan*' are recited and sung to signify that a holy union between two souls has taken place. The marriage ceremony is conducted in a Gurudwara or at the bride's home or any other suitable place where Guru Granth Sahib is duly installed.

Death

To a Sikh, birth and death are closely associated, because they are both part of the cycle of human life. Sikhs believe in reincarnation and mourning is therefore, discouraged. Sikhs cremate their dead and for cremation, the body is first washed and dressed in clean clothes complete with the five K's (in case of baptised Sikhs). The ashes are immersed in the nearest river or sea. This is followed by the Bhog ceremony, which includes a complete reading of Guru Granth Sahib either at home or in a Gurudwara.

DIET

Initiated Sikhs are vegetarians and they also abstain from alcohol. Other Sikhs who might eat meat do not, as a rule, eat beef. Sikhs do not eat Halal meat, which is meat that has been killed by the Muslim/Jewish method. Halal meat involves cutting the throat of the animal and allowing it to bleed to death.

In Sikhism, smoking is strictly forbidden.

LANGUAGE

The major language among the Sikh community is Punjabi. All Sikh scriptures are written in Punjabi using the Gurmukhi Script.

ਵਲਵਰਹੈਪਟਨ ਟਿੰਟਰਫੇ ਗੁਰੂਪ ਸਥਾਨਿਕ ਭਾਈਚਾਰੇ ਨਾਲ ਸਾਂਝੀਵਾਲਤਾ ਨਾਲ ਕੰਮ ਕਰਨਾ
ਚਾਹੁੰਦਾ ਹੈ।

FESTIVALS

Gurpurb

A Sikh festival or holy day to commemorate the birth or martyrdom of their Gurus is called a Gurpurb, meaning Guru's remembrance day. The celebration is generally similar for all such holy days; only the hymns and history of a particular occasion is different.

Guru Nanak's Birthday usually comes in the month of November and is a most significant Gurpurb for Sikhs. At the start of the celebrations, Akhand Path (forty-eight hour non-stop reading of Guru Granth Sahib) is held in the Gurudwara. Guru Granth Sahib is taken out in a procession, which is led by *panj pyaras* (the Five Beloved Ones).

Guru Gobind Singh's Gurpurb celebrates the tenth Guru's birthday is generally falls in December or in January.

The martyrdom anniversary of Guru Arjun Dev, the fifth Guru, falls in May or June. He was tortured to death under the orders of the Moghul Emperor Jehangir in 1606.

Baisakhi, also called Vaisakhi is the birthday of Khalsa (the Pure One). Guru Gobind Singh founded the Khalsa brotherhood on 30th March 1699. As part of the one-day celebrations, the Amrit ceremony is held in Gurudwaras and those who offer are initiated. The Sikhs taking **Amrit** are called Khalsa. Baisakhi is generally celebrated on the 13 April every year.

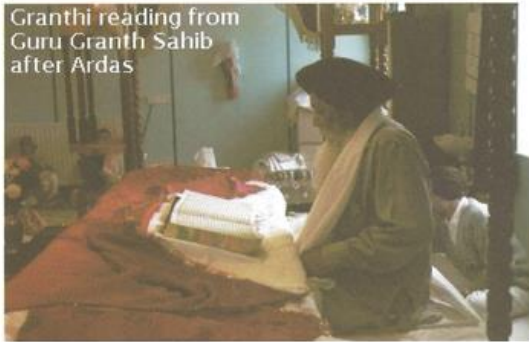
Diwali is the festival celebrated to express the joy at the return of the sixth Guru to Amritsar in 1620 after his release from Gwalior Jail. Illuminated events, featuring fireworks, are held in the evening at both Gurudwaras and Sikh homes.

LOCAL PLACES OF WORSHIP:

Ramgarhia Sabha 342-344 Newhampton Road East Whitmore Reans Wolverhampton WV1 4AD Tel: 425156	The Secretary
Ramgarhia Board Westbury Street Wolverhampton WV1 1JD Tel: 426885 Fax: 685742	The Secretary
Guru Nanak Satsang Gurdwara 200-204 Cannock Road Wolverhampton WV10 0AL Tel: 450453	The Secretary
Guru Nanak Gurdwara Arthur Street Bilston Wolverhampton WV14 0DG Tel: 492383	The Secretary
Nanaksar Thath Sikh Temple Mander Street Wolverhampton WV3 0JZ Tel: 429379	The Secretary
Guru Nanak Sikh Temple Sedgley Street Blakenhall Wolverhampton WV2 4AJ Tel: 459413/458877 Fax: 459933	The Secretary
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Images of Sikh Worship

Granthi reading from
Guru Granth Sahib
after Ardas



Ramgarhia Sabha
Newhampton Road

Guru Nanak Sikh Gurudwara
Sedgley Street
The Five Beloved



Nanaksar Thath
Sikh Temple
Mander Street

Worshippers

SIKHISM: THE NAMDHARI SIKH COMMUNITY



The Namdharis are the Sikhs initiated by the living *Satguru* (True Guru) with the most revered and sacred *NAM* known as "*Gurmantar*" – God's holy word whispered into the ears secretly. The practice of *Nam* was originated by the first Guru Sri Satguru Nanak Dev Ji and is used for reciting in silent meditation for spiritual realisation under the direct guidance and grace of the living Satguru Ji. The term Namdhari literally means someone who adopts and practises God's name in their heart.

All Namdhari Sikhs are Amritdhari (initiated) and adhere strictly to the teaching of all the Sikh Gurus and believe in principles envisaged in both the Holy Sikh scriptures of Sri Adi Granth Sahib and Sri Dasam Granth Sahib with equal reverence. They have implicit faith in the continuing succession of the living Gurus starting from the founder Sri Satguru Nanak Dev Ji. It is their fundamental belief that the tenth Guru, Sri Satguru Gobind Singh Ji did not pass away at Nander (Maharashtra) in 1708 as is generally believed by other Sikhs, but actually lived until 1812. The Namdharis further believe that the Guruship still continues with the successive living Gurus instead of conferring it on Sri Adi Granth Sahib. For Namdharis, there has been no change in the status of the Sri Adi Granth Sahib since the time of the 5th Guru Sri Satguru Arjan Dev Ji; the institutions of Scripture and Guruship continue side by side and do not coincide. Namdharis believe in the concept of a supreme spiritual authority forever present in a living Satguru Ji.

Thus the 11th Namdhari Guru – Sri Satguru Balak Singh (1785 – 1862) was entrusted with the Guruship by Sri Satguru Gobind Singh Ji. The 12th Namdhari Guru Sri Satguru Ram Singh (born 1816 and exiled to Burma in 1872) was succeeded by Sri Satguru Hari Singh Ji (1819 – 1906), who in turn passed the Guruship to Sri Satguru Partap Singh Ji (1890 – 1959).

The present spiritual Head of over 2.5 million Namdhari Sikhs is His Holiness Sri Satguru Jagjit Singh Ji Maharaj (born 1920 and attained Guruship in 1959). This principle of succession and continued presence of a living Satguru Ji distinguishes the Namdharis from other Sikhs. Their current Satguru Ji addressed the Millennium World Peace Summit of religious and spiritual leaders held at the UNO General Assembly in America in August 2000.

Sri Satguru Ram Singh Ji revived and reformed the Sikh principles laid down by earlier Sikh Gurus by eradicating the shortcomings, which had crept into Sikhism over the years. To restore the fallen Sikh code of ethics, their social, moral, religious and political spirit, Sri Satguru Ram Singh Ji unfurled the white triangular flag on the day of *Baisakhi* Festival on April 12th 1857, symbolising freedom, truth, unity, love, purity, simplicity and peace. On this day His Holiness inaugurated the Namdhari Panth (Sant Khalsa), who are also known as "KUKAS" (shouters) in their mystical state of ecstasy and in India's political records. Namdhari Sikhs pioneered the struggle for the freedom of India from the British Raj and they hold a honourable place in the history of the Independence of India. Many of his ideas were taken up sixty years later by Mahatma Gandhi. Namdharis support inter faith work for peace and harmony between all faith communities.

The law of karma is not independent of God. It is believed that submission to God's *hukam* becomes a means to release from the 'law of karma'.

One of the essential beliefs in Sikhism is the belief in equality of humankind. Sikhs, therefore, do not believe in a caste system. Nor do they believe in idol-worship, or rituals or fasting.

Central to Sikhism are the beliefs in:

**Kirat karna,
Vand chhakna,
Naam japna, and
Seva karna.**

Kirat karna means Sikhs should earn their living by honest means, and not be deceitful for any personal gain. This is encapsulated in Guru Nanak's statement: "*Truth is higher than all, but higher still is true living.*" Sikhism consists of practical living, in rendering service to humanity and ensuring brotherly love towards all.

Vand chhakna means it is important to be charitable and share what we earn with those in need. What prevents the individual from uniting with God is their ego ('*haumai*'). Dominated by *haumai* and other sins such as lust, greed, anger and attachment to material things or people, a person never experiences the joy of the divine spark.

Naam japna is to recite God's name from the heart.

Seva karna requires Sikhs to undertake selfless community service for anyone in need of it. Seva can be seen in Langar halls (free kitchen at a Sikh Temple).

(N.B. A Sikh Temple can be pronounced as Gurudwara or Gurdwara. Free food (langar) is available from the community kitchen in a Sikh Temple)).

Initiated Sikhs wear five sacred symbols, commonly known as **five K's**, prescribed by Guru Gobind Singh. Each of them starts with the letter '**K**' in the Punjabi language.

1. **Kesh** or uncut natural hair is regarded as a symbol of saintliness and acceptance of God's will.
2. **Kangha** or the comb is necessary to keep the hair clean and tidy.
3. **Kara** or the steel bangle symbolises restraint from evil deeds.
4. **Kachha or kachhehra** or the shorts must be worn at all times reminding Sikhs of the need for self-restraint over passions and desires.
5. **Kirpan** or the sword is the symbol of courage and self-defence. It symbolises the readiness to defend the weak and the oppressed. According to Sikhs, the kirpan must never be drawn against anybody out of revenge.

The five K's, along with the turban, distinguish a Sikh from any other person in the world.

SCRIPTURES AND WORSHIP

The holiest book of the Sikhs is Guru Granth Sahib, which was compiled by the Guru Arjun, their fifth Guru. It is a collection of poetic compositions of Sikh Gurus and has contributions by numerous Hindu and Muslim saints. The tenth Guru, Gobind Singh made it his commandment that after his death, Sikhs should acknowledge the Granth Sahib as his successor, as a living Guru.

(N.B. Sahib or Ji are terms used to indicate respect).

No Sikh ceremony is regarded as complete unless it is performed in the presence of Guru Granth Sahib. The shrine, which houses the Guru Granth is called a **Gurudwara**, literally, a door (dwara) to ultimate enlightenment (guru). Many Sikhs keep the holy book in their homes, paying full respect by keeping it in a separate room. Sikhs bow in front of their Book with their heads covered and shoes removed. They stand in front of it in homage, or sit on the floor while the Guru Granth is always placed on a higher platform.

Mool Mantar is the opening verse of the Jap Ji Sahib, written by Guru Nanak and is the first hymn in the Guru Granth Sahib.

The English version of the Mool Mantar is as below:

There is One Being
Truth by Name
Primal Creator
Without Fear
Without enmity
Timeless in form
Unborn
Self-existent
The grace of the Guru

MEDITATE
Truth before time
Truth throughout time
Truth here and now
Says Nanak, Truth is evermore.

MILESTONES

All Sikh ceremonies like birth, initiation, marriage and death have a religious tone. They are held in the presence of Guru Granth Sahib and include Kirtan, the singing of appropriate hymns for the occasion, saying of Ardas, the formal prayer and the distribution of *Karah Parshad*, the holy food, to the congregation.

Birth

Soon after a child is born, prayers are offered in a Gurudwara or to Guru Granth Sahib asking for a special blessing of good health, long life and the Sikh way of life for the child. After reciting Ardas, Guru Granth Sahib is opened at random. The first letter of the first word of the hymn on the left page is selected as the first letter of the child's name. Sikh names are mostly common for either sex. The word Kaur meaning 'princess' or 'lioness' is added after a girl's name and the name Singh meaning 'lion' after a boy's name.

Marriage

Sikh marriages are usually arranged. However, this does not mean that a boy or a girl is forced into wedlock according to the parents' choice only. It is important to secure the agreement of the boy and the girl by mutual discussion before arrangements are finalised.

The Sikh marriage is monogamous. The marriage ceremony is called *Anand Karaj* ('ceremony of bliss'). Holy wedding hymns called '*lavan*' are recited and sung to signify that a holy union between two souls has taken place. The marriage ceremony is conducted in a Gurudwara or at the bride's home or any other suitable place where Guru Granth Sahib is duly installed.

Death

To a Sikh, birth and death are closely associated, because they are both part of the cycle of human life. Sikhs believe in reincarnation and mourning is therefore, discouraged. Sikhs cremate their dead and for cremation, the body is first washed and dressed in clean clothes complete with the five K's (in case of baptised Sikhs). The ashes are immersed in the nearest river or sea. This is followed by the Bhog ceremony, which includes a complete reading of Guru Granth Sahib either at home or in a Gurudwara.

DIET

Initiated Sikhs are vegetarians and they also abstain from alcohol. Other Sikhs who might eat meat do not, as a rule, eat beef. Sikhs do not eat Halal meat, which is meat that has been killed by the Muslim/Jewish method. Halal meat involves cutting the throat of the animal and allowing it to bleed to death.

In Sikhism, smoking is strictly forbidden.

LANGUAGE

The major language among the Sikh community is Punjabi. All Sikh scriptures are written in Punjabi using the Gurmukhi Script.

ਵਲਵਰਹੈਂਪਟਨ ਇੰਟਰਫੇਸ ਗਰੁੱਪ ਸਥਾਨਿਕ ਭਾਈਚਾਰੇ ਨਾਲ ਸਾਂਝੀਵਾਲਤਾ ਨਾਲ ਕੰਮ ਕਰਨਾ
ਚਾਹੁੰਦਾ ਹੈ।

FESTIVALS

Gurpurb

A Sikh festival or holy day to commemorate the birth or martyrdom of their Gurus is called a Gurpurb, meaning Guru's remembrance day. The celebration is generally similar for all such holy days; only the hymns and history of a particular occasion is different.

Guru Nanak's Birthday usually comes in the month of November and is a most significant Gurpurb for Sikhs. At the start of the celebrations, Akhand Path (forty-eight hour non-stop reading of Guru Granth Sahib) is held in the Gurudwara. Guru Granth Sahib is taken out in a procession, which is led by *panj pyaras* (the Five Beloved Ones).

Guru Gobind Singh's Gurpurb celebrates the tenth Guru's birthday is generally falls in December or in January.

The martyrdom anniversary of Guru Arjun Dev, the fifth Guru, falls in May or June. He was tortured to death under the orders of the Moghul Emperor Jehangir in 1606.

Baisakhi, also called Vaisakhi is the birthday of Khalsa (the Pure One). Guru Gobind Singh founded the Khalsa brotherhood on 30th March 1699. As part of the one-day celebrations, the Amrit ceremony is held in Gurudwaras and those who offer are initiated. The Sikhs taking **Amrit** are called Khalsa. Baisakhi is generally celebrated on the 13 April every year.

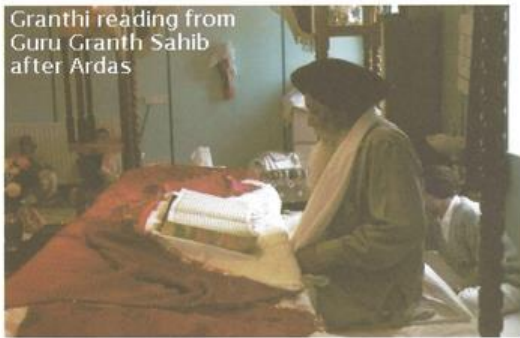
Diwali is the festival celebrated to express the joy at the return of the sixth Guru to Amritsar in 1620 after his release from Gwalior Jail. Illuminated events, featuring fireworks, are held in the evening at both Gurudwaras and Sikh homes.

LOCAL PLACES OF WORSHIP:

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CORE BELIEFS

Namdhari Sikhs are staunch vegetarians and total abstainers from all intoxicating drinks containing drugs, and any food that contains animal products. Namdharis can be easily recognised from their white turbans tied horizontally across their foreheads; they also wear a white woollen Rosary (108 knotted Mala), which is used in their meditation and prayer. They are also widely known for their very simple and inexpensive mass marriage ceremonies in the presence of *Sri Satguru Ji Maharaj*. Namdhari Sikhs also have an intense love for devotional and Indian traditional classical music.

At present Namdhari Sikhs are spread out in many countries all over the world. Their Headquarters are located at Sri Bhaini Sahib, District Ludhiana in the Punjab, India. In the United Kingdom, their Gurdwaras are located in East London, Southall, Birmingham and Leeds. Presently there are 10,000 Namdhari Sikhs in the UK.

Nearest Place of Worship:

Gurdwara Namdhari Sangat and Community Centre
The Sant Khalsa Spiritual Institute of the Namdhari Sikh Community
1199 Coventry Road
Hay Mills
Birmingham
B25 8DF

Tel: 0121 753 0092

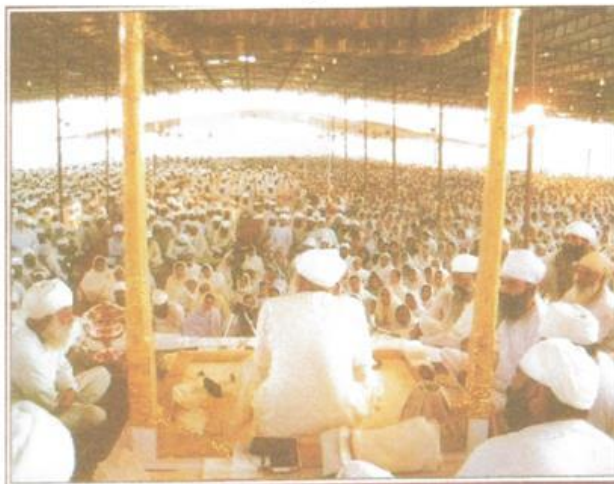
Images of Namdhari Sikhs at Worship



*Namdhari Sikh current Guru
His Holiness Sri Satguru
Jagjit Singh Ji Maharaj*



*Sri Satguru Ram Singh Ji
Twelfth Guru*



His Holiness Sri Satguru Ji preaching to Sangat (congregation)

AD DHARMA: RAVIDASSI FAITH



BACKGROUND

Ad-Dharma means Original Religion, Basic Faith. Ad-Dharmis are also known as Ravidassi because they honour Guru Ravidass who was one of the prime exponents of the Bhakti Movement, a socio-economic programme which aimed to reform society through the promotion of the concept of Bhakti (Devotion) to God. Guru Ravidass was born at Benaras in the Uttar Pradesh State of India in the first half of the fifteenth century. It is believed that he was born in 1414, although the exact date of his birth is not known.

Ravidassis are neither Hindus nor Sikhs, although they share many beliefs with Sikhs and with Hindus. They strongly believe in the equality of mankind irrespective of caste, colour and creed.

In Wolverhampton there are approximately 2,500 followers of Guru Ravidass.

CORE PRINCIPLES AND BELIEFS

The members of Ravidassi community believe in one God and do not worship idols or images. They believe that in order to achieve right understanding of God one needs support and guidance from a Guru, an inspired teacher.

Guru Ravidass spoke against the divisive effect of castes on the Hindus in India in his time. In his lifetime, the religious situation in India was marked by rigorous divisions based on castes, and the tyranny of high caste society towards lower castes was very much in evidence. Guru Ravidass was born into the Chamar caste – into a community who specialised in leatherwork. People belonging to lower caste such as *chamars* were deemed to be untouchables and denied access to temples and communal areas and facilities. He felt that people who had seen the truth about God formed a single community irrespective of their background. He called this spiritual community **Begum Pura**.

SCRIPTURES

Ravidassis worship Guru Granth Sahib, which contains 40 *shabads* (hymns) and one *Shalok* (verse) of Guru Ravidass together with the other Gurus and saints. His hymns are composed in Hindi, a language spoken by common people in his time. Guru Granth Sahib is, therefore, honoured in all Ravidassi temples.

WORSHIP AND SYMBOLS

Guru Ravidass temples are open to everyone for prayer and meditation. Although there are set times for public worship, people are welcome to visit whenever they feel the need to pray. A temple is the focus of not only worship but also serves as a focal point for social and cultural activity.

Worship takes the form of prayer and hymn singing. This is usually followed by a sermon from the priest or some other knowledgeable person to explain the teachings of Guru Ravidass. Considerable significance is attached to the sermon following prayers in order to put in context and amplify the teachings of Guru Ravidass. This is followed by **Parshad**, - holy food- which is shared with the congregation.

As in Sikh Gurudwaras, public worship is followed by **langar**, a common meal for all. The langar is a centre for social service throughout the week.

MILESTONES

Birth

A child's birth is a major event for the whole family. The thanksgiving and naming ceremony is held either at home or in the Temple. The name is chosen by randomly opening the Guru Granth Sahib and using the first visible letter as initial.

Marriage

Ravidassis actively oppose oppression of women and believe that men and women are of equal value. They believe in monogamy and will have only one partner in marriage. As with many other communities originating from the Indian Sub-Continent, marriages are generally arranged, but forced marriages are not allowed. It is considered to be essential to secure the agreement of both the bride and bridegroom before a marriage proposal is finalised. Family links form a very significant part of a married couple's life. Ravidassis do not support the notion of renouncing the material world or their family for people to achieve peace and oneness with God. They regard hard, honest work as one of the requirements of their faith.

Death

Ravidassis cremate their dead. After the cremation, the ashes are collected and usually scattered in the Ganges as a priest prays and reads hymns.

FESTIVALS

The most important festivals for Ravidassis are those relating to Guru Ravidass. His birthday is celebrated and his death is commemorated.

Diwali is a very popular festival of lights when Ravidassis honour both Rama and Guru Hargobind.

Like Hindus, Ravidassis celebrate **Rakhi**, which celebrates the mutual love of brother and sister.

DIET

Although Ravidassis do not have strict dietary rules, they avoid eating beef and **halal** meat, meat that has been ritually slaughtered. Consumption of meat, alcohol and tobacco is forbidden in their temples.

LANGUAGES

Ravidassis speak the language of the region in India they have originated from. Most followers of Guru Ravidass in Wolverhampton speak Punjabi as their home language.

LOCAL PLACES OF WORSHIP:

Shri Guru Ravidass Dharmik Sabha

181 Dudley Road
Wolverhampton
West Midlands
WV2 3DR

Tel: 457007

Sant Dera Baba Gobind das Memorial Temple

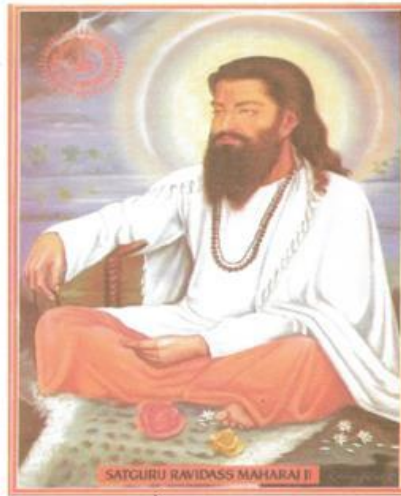
95 Wellington Road
Bilston
West Midlands
WV14 6BQ

Tel: 354048

Shri Guru Ravidass Temple

13 Somerford Place
Willenhall
West Midlands
WV13 3DT

Images of Ad Dharma Ravidassi Worship



Ravidassi worshippers celebrating in the Temple



Guru Ravidass Birthday Worship – Making an offering