

YOUNG EUROPEAN MUSLIM



From the Editorial Team . . .

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Welcome to Volume 2, issue 1 of the Young European Muslim Newsletter (YEM). We are a team of young people from Blackburn in Lancashire whose ages range from 13 to 19. This newsletter is intended, not especially for Young European Muslims, but for everyone throughout the world. We work together on a regular basis to design and produce quarterly newsletters on 'Muslim issues' such as Islamic festivals and Bullying. We constantly seek feedback from our readers concerning the contents of this newsletter - Were there any parts you particularly enjoyed? Can we make any improvements? Any form of feedback would be highly welcome.

beliefs, festivals, sacred places and scriptures, for the sake of an equitable representation of the faiths and a structured and logical format.



Introduction

Community Cohesion is becoming another one of those over-used by-words that seem to be thrown into a sentence to justify various remits, often used in government speeches and newspapers and discussed in classrooms under citizenship. What it boils down to is, helping people talk with each other and learning to respect our differences. The most common reasons for experienced discrimination are skin colour and faith. Racism is based upon the fear of the 'other'. Only a change in an individual's perception can resolve this. Discrimination based on differences of faith comes from the lack of knowledge.

The aim of this newsletter is to provide some of that knowledge to help people recognise the similarities between faiths and help appreciate the differences. The world has many faiths and religions, some Monotheistic, some Polytheistic and others Atheistic in nature. For the sake of practicality, we have focused on the major faiths of Lancashire, and then only touched on the common themes of each faith, e.g. origins, basic

Islam

The word Islam means unconditional 'submission' to the will of **Allah** (God). Islam was revealed to the **Prophet Muhammad** (Peace Be upon Him - PBUH), in the seventh century CE by Allah, who sent revelations via the intermediary of the Archangel *Jibreel*, or 'Gabriel'. These revelations were later collected into the Islamic Holy Book known universally as the Holy Qur'an. The followers of Islam are called Muslims. Allah has revealed in the Holy Qur'an that Islam is the accepted religion in His sight and Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) is the last messenger to mankind.

In the world there are approximately 1.2 billion Muslims, who live all over the world. In many countries, Islam is the state religion and Muslims are in the majority, e.g. Saudi Arabia. However, in numerous other countries, Muslims are in the minority, but they do enjoy religious freedom, e.g. in England. In recent years Islam has attracted many converts, in fact at a faster rate than any other religion in the world today.

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Allah is the Arabic word for God. It is a unique term since it has no plural or gender, unlike the English word for God. To a Muslim, Allah is the Almighty, the Creator of everything. There is nothing equal to Allah. He is unique, we cannot see him, yet He is everywhere and knows every thing. The Holy Qur'an mentions that Allah is closer to us than our jugular vein.

However, the Qur'an categorically states that it is beyond the human mind to comprehend Allah. Knowledge of Allah and belief in Him is the very foundation of Islam. Allah is always there for us. He is The Omnipresent, The Omnipotent, The All-knowing, The All-Hearing and The Forgiver.

Allah has many attributes which are named in the Holy Qur'an. These names collectively are known as the ninety-nine beautiful names of Allah. Everything on earth glorifies Him. He is the Greatest and the most praiseworthy.

Prophet Muhammed (PBUH)

The name of the Prophet of Islam means "one who is repeatedly praised". Traditionally every mention of the Prophet by name, or by title is followed by the invocation 'peace be upon him'. This practice is also observed following the mention of any other Prophet, e.g. **Isa (Jesus)** (peace and blessings be upon him).

The Prophet Muhammed (PBUH) was sent by Allah as the last Prophet to all mankind. He received revelation in the form of the Holy Qur'an. The Qur'an clarifies what other Prophets and Messengers had said before him in their mission of inviting people to the oneness of Allah.

The Prophet's life is a perfect model of faith and one that every Muslim should strive to emulate. The Prophet Muhammed (PBUH) was born in **Makkah** (Mecca) from the lineage of Prophet **Ibrahim** (Abraham). Even before being appointed as the Messenger, people used to love and respect The Prophet Muhammed (PBUH) for his compassion and kindness as well as his truthfulness. He also looked after the poor. At the age of forty he received the first revelation of the Holy Qur'an from Archangel Gabriel (PBUH). He continued to receive these revelations throughout his life, during which he faithfully delivered the message of Islam to mankind as he received it. Prophet Muhammed's (PBUH)

own life and the lives of his community of followers (the Ummah) was shaped and guided by the message of these revelations.

The Prophet Muhammed (PBUH) passed away at the age of 63 in Madeenah (Medina), not long after he had performed his farewell pilgrimage. His holy Tomb can still be visited, and to this day, millions of Muslims from all over the world travel to pay their respects and offer salutations to the beloved Prophet (PBUH).

Since such thorough care has been put into learning and collecting, everything The Prophet Muhammed (PBUH) said and did, Muslims have a very rich heritage of knowledge about his life. This enables a Muslim to follow his example step by step, thereby attempting to secure the contentment of Allah.

The Five Pillars of Islam

The Five Pillars of Islam are known as the "essentials" of the religion. The Five Pillars consist of the **Shahadah** (creed), **Salah** (devotional prayers), **Zakat** (compulsory alms), **Sawm** (fasting), and **Hajj** (pilgrimage). The observance of these five pillars is required of all Muslims. Non-observance, but not denial, of the latter four of the Five Pillars does not constitute departure from Islam. But these four pillars are the practice orientation of Islam and it is extremely important to remain steadfast upon them since they nourish the faith.

1) **Shahadah** means "to witness", or "to testify". The *Shahadah* acknowledges that, "there is no God but Allah, and that Muhammad is the Messenger of Allah.

2) The **Salah** are the five daily prayers. It con-



sists of a series of movements and recitations and thus is an act of worship. Performing Salah

is obligatory after the age of puberty. The five daily prayers are offered at different times of the day. All prayers must be performed in a clean place, facing the **Qibla** (direction of the **Holy Ka'bah**), and in the state of **wudu** (ritual ablution).

3) **Zakat** is the annual payment of compulsory alms on a fixed scale. It is considered an obligatory payment that purifies ones wealth. The notion of *Zakat* is based on the principle of 'taking from the rich and giving to the poor'. This will develop within the well-off a degree of sympathy and care towards the needy. It is the first documented form of social welfare in the history of mankind!

4) **Sawm** is fasting during the month of Ramadan, the ninth month of the Islamic lunar calendar. Ramadan is very important, because it is the month in which the Glorious Holy Qur'an was first sent down by Allah to the Prophet Muhammed (PBUH). During this month Muslims fast from, just before sunrise to sunset. During this period Muslims abstain from eating, drinking and sexual intimacy.

5) The **Hajj** involves travelling to the house of



Allah in Mecca, and the surrounding area, as a pilgrim. The journey is complemented with a visit to the holy city of Medina, the last resting place of the Prophet. Islamic law stipulates that every adult Muslim must make this Pilgrimage, at least once in their lifetime, subject to their being free from physical and financial constraints.

Hajj is the largest annual gathering of people on Earth. It was started thousands of years ago by the Prophet *Ibrahim* (Abraham, PBUH) and his first son *Isma'il*, (Ishmael, PBUH). Every year, during the month of Hajj approximately 4 million

people congregate in Mecca, from different countries, to perform the rituals of the Hajj. It serves to remind mankind of the 'Grand Assembly' on the Day of Judgement when the whole of the human race will stand equal before Allah.

The five pillars could be summarised by saying that Muslims testify to the oneness of Allah in *Shahada*, constantly remember Allah in *Salat*, practice self-denial in *Sawm*, display compassion in *Zakat* and demonstrate devoutness and equality in *Hajj*.

Hadith

Hadith are "accounts" or sayings of the Prophet (PBUH), specifically traditions related to the deeds and sayings of the Prophet (PBUH) as recounted by his Companions. The most famous collections of Hadith are the *Sahih* "the authentic" of *Imam Muhammad Ibn Ismail al-Bukhari* (commonly known as *Bukhari*) (705- 870 CE, 194 - 256 AH) and the *Sahih* of *Imam Abu-al-Hussain Muslim*, (commonly known as *Muslim*). The collections of *Bukhari* and *Muslim* were meticulously compiled in the first one hundred and fifty years of Islam. Their authenticity has been upheld by the rigorous standards that were applied by the early generation scholars to assess the soundness of Hadith texts.

The purpose of the Hadith is to perpetuate the teachings of the Prophet (PBUH), making them a living example for every generation and to serve as a primary legal source, second in importance only to the Holy Qur'an.

The Day of Judgement

Belief in life after death and the Day of Judgement forms an integral part of Islamic teachings. On the day of Judgement everything we have ever thought, done and said will be presented to us in a Book. Even things which we thought were secret will be revealed, because all things are known to Allah.

On the Day of Judgment, people will be sorted into groups. Those who have done wrong will be gathered together and questioned harshly and then led to the gates of Hell, where eternal damnation awaits them. Similarly those people who have led a good and just life will also be judged and led to the gates of Paradise, wherein they will dwell in bliss for eternity.

Islamic Festivals

Muslims celebrate a number of special occasions, which are observed with devotion and joy to seek the pleasure of, and as a thanksgiving to Allah. Islamic festivals are observed according to the Islamic lunar calendar, hence festival dates are determined by the phases of the moon.

Although **Muharram** (the first month of the Islamic year) is a sanctified month as a whole, the 10th day of *Muharram* is the most sacred among all its days. The day is named '**Ashurah**'. According to the Holy Prophet's (PBUH) Companion *Ibn 'Abbas*. When the Holy Prophet (PBUH) migrated to Medina it was discovered that the Jews of Medina used to fast on the 10th day of *Muharram*. They said that it was the day on which the Prophet *Musa* (Moses PBUH) and his followers miraculously crossed the Red Sea and the Pharaoh was drowned in its waters. It is also reported in a number of authentic traditions that in the beginning, fasting on the day of '*Ashura*' was obligatory for the Muslims. However, when the fasts of Ramadan were made obligatory, the fast of the day of '*Ashura*' was made optional.

Milad-un-Nabi is the birthday celebration of the Prophet Muhammed (PBUH) and is celebrated by Muslims as *Eid-al-Milad-un-Nabi*. The Prophet Muhammed (PBUH) was born in Arabia in the city of Mecca on the 12th day of *Rabi-ul-Awwal*, which was Monday the 20th of April, 571 C.E. This is also His death anniversary. The occasion is remembering the favours bestowed upon the *Ummah* (Muslim community).

Lailat-al-Qadr is the night in which Prophet Muhammed first received the message from Allah communicated by the Archangel Gabriel. It is referred to in the Qur'an as "**The Night of Power**". From sound traditions of The Prophet, we know that *Lailat-al-Qadr* is one of the odd-numbered nights of the last ten days of the month of Ramadan. The Prophet Muhammed used to exert himself in devotion during the last ten nights of Ramadan to a greater extent than at any other time. It is commonly held to be the 27th night.

In light of the Qur'an, the reward for any act of devotion during this night is 'greater' than a thousand months of worship, but the Qur'an does not specify any limit to the actual amount

of reward that can be acquired. No doubt, Allah knows best. For this reason, Muslims are encouraged to further increase their acts of devotion during this night, as its merits are too much to ignore.

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Two of the most important dates in the Islamic Year are the two Eid Festivals. The first is **Eid-ul-Fitr** which is commonly known as the "**Festival of Breaking the Fast**". This is because it takes place immediately after the Holy Month of Ramadan. It is a time of feasting and celebration. Special prayers and sermons are offered, alms (*sadaqat ul-fitr*) are also distributed to the poor. *Eid-ul-fitr* is a family and community orientated festival.



The second festival is called **Eid-ul-Adha, (The festival of sacrifice)**. This festival takes place on the 10th of *Dhu al- Hijjah*. This Eid marks the end of the obligatory acts of the pilgrimage to Mecca (the Hajj).

The Mosque

The Mosque is the focal point of a Muslim Community. It is far more than just a place of worship - it is a resource centre, where sections of the community come together for many different events. A Mosque is an education centre, a venue for luncheon clubs, a place where youth groups get together and where Muslim women can train for future employment. It is also a symbolic meeting place for the elderly. Mosques are also important for youth education and all boys and girls aged from five to fifteen attend for two hours every day, between 5pm to 7pm, for religious education.

Christianity

Christians take their name from Jesus Christ (PBUH) and is the largest religion in the world. These people follow the teachings of Jesus and of their holy book which is called a Bible. They believe that Jesus (PBUH) was the son of God. He was born over 2000 years ago in Palestine. At the age of thirty he formed a group of disciples and travelled, teaching, preaching and healing the sick. He declared the need for people to repent and to believe and follow him. The disciples saw Jesus (PBUH) as the Messiah the Jews awaited. They believed that God, Creator and Ruler of the universe, became incarnate in Christ to offer forgiveness and salvation to humankind.

Many Christians believe in The Holy Trinity. This means God in three persons - God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit.

Jesus (PBUH)

Jesus' (PBUH) mother, Mary (PBUH) was told by Archangel Gabriel that she was going to have a baby and that he was to be the saviour. He was born in Bethlehem in a manger. Shepherds were told by Angels of his birth and came to visit him, later three wise men came from the East to see him, they had been shown the way by a bright new star in the sky, which they believed meant an important ruler had been born.

The Roman Catholic Church

Approximately 50% of all Christians belong to the Roman Catholic Church. The leader of this Church is called the Pope. He lives in The Vatican in Rome, Italy. Roman Catholics believe that Mary was special because she was the mother of Jesus. They often pray to her and ask her to help them. They also pray to Saints, people who were very close to God when he was alive.

Protestant Church

For about 500 years the Roman Catholic Church was the only Church in Europe. It was very powerful. However some people began to question certain aspects and consequently wanted to bring about a change. People formed groups of their own and began to worship in different ways. They were called Protestants because they had protested about what they thought was wrong. Changes like this are often called reforms. This historical period is called the Reformation. The Church of England belongs to this branch of Christianity. The Protestant Leader of England is the Archbishop of Canterbury and the head of the Church is the Queen of England.

The Bible is the Christians Holy Book. The Bible is divided in two parts, The Old and The New Testaments. It is actually a collection of 66 books, of which the latter 27 were written over a period of 1000 years, after the death of Jesus(PBUH).

The Old Testament contains many of the holy books from Judaism. Christians believe that Jesus was a Jew and so were the first Christians. The Old Testament contains 39 books, they tell the history of the Jews, and how they learned more about God.

The New Testament tells the story of Jesus and what happened after his death and the Resurrection The New Testament contains 27 different books.



Christians go to **Church** on Sundays because they believe that was the day Jesus was resurrected from his death before he rose to heaven. Catholics call this Sunday meeting in Church a "Mass" and Protestants call it a "Service".

Christian Festivals

Christians celebrate various festivals throughout the year, the first major one is **Lent**, this is celebrated 40 days before Easter. Christians believe that this is a best time for repentance and asking for forgiveness from their priest, who will listen to their confessions and absolve them after giving them some prayers to say, the best day to go to confession is '**Shrove Tuesday**'.

After this is '**Ash Wednesday**' when Christians smear ashes in the shape of a crucifix on their forehead to give an outward sign of their repentance. The next festival is **Easter** itself, this is the time when Christians believe Jesus was crucified. Good Friday was the day Jesus (PBUH)

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was nailed to a cross, and 3pm was the time when Christians believe he died.

On **Easter Sunday** Christians believe Jesus (PBUH) ascended into Heaven. This is celebrated by the highest 'Mass' of the year, when special prayers are said and candles are lighted from midnight until dawn and the whole church is filled with light. Christians take part in the mass then they may take communion if they wish, which is (a tiny piece of unleavened bread and a sip of wine) that Christians believe to be the body and blood of Jesus Christ (PBUH) only after a priest has heard their confession.

Christians give each other Easter Eggs to symbolise the tomb in which Jesus was buried, because eggs appear to be dry and dead, but life breaks out from inside them.

Seven weeks later is the festival of **Pentecost** (Whit Sunday) when it is believed to be the day Jesus Christ (PBUH) sent the Holy Spirit to his disciples in the form of a great rushing wind and flames of fire which rested above their heads. Four weeks before Christmas is Advent this is an extra special time for Christian people to think about the coming of Jesus (PBUH).

The next important festival in the Christian calendar is **Christmas**. This is the time when Christians believe Jesus (PBUH) was born. On that day (25th December) Christian people go to church, exchange gifts and eat a special feast with their friends and family.

Judaism

Judaism is one of the oldest religions in the world. The people who follow it are called Jews.

The birth of Judaism came about nearly 4000 years ago, when Abraham (PBUH) and the Jewish people made a promise to worship only one god, called **Yahweh**.

They had a covenant or agreement that if Abraham (PBUH) and his followers worshipped only *Yahweh*, they would be God's chosen people and could live in the land called Canaan. Later, Moses (PBUH) became a great leader of the Jews and helped them to establish their religion in freedom outside Egypt, where they had lived in slavery. This was called the 'Exodus' and is remembered with deep feeling by all Jews.

The heart of the Jewish religion is the Torah 'the Law', written in the first five books of the Hebrew Bible. Torah does not only mean 'law' but also 'teaching' and 'guidance'. In the Torah, God has given teachings about Himself, His purposes, and how He wishes His people to obey Him in every part of their lives. Jews believe in one God who is a spirit. They do not believe that God is male or female and believe that God was never born and will never die, that he made everything, sees and knows everything. Jews have more than one name for god, but they use one name more than the others. This name is *Adonai* ('Lord').



The Jewish place of worship is called a Synagogue and the Ark is at the front. These are cupboards which hold the Holy Scrolls. A lamp is always alight, because it reminds Jewish people that God is always with them.

The scrolls are made from a long piece of parchment. This is animal skin that is dried and smoothed out so that it can be written on. The ends are sewn round wooden rollers. Each scroll is about 60 meters from one end to the other. The person reading the scroll uses a special pointer so they can follow the words without touching the parchment with their hands.

When the scrolls are put away in the Holy Ark, they are covered with special cloths called mantles. At services in the synagogue, men wear a cap called a *kippah*, it shows respect for God. At morning services men also wear a *tallit*, this is a prayer robe, rather like a scarf. Men also wear two black leather boxes called *tefillin*, they wear one on the middle of their forehead. The other is fastened to their arm facing their heart, inside are tiny scrolls which contain four parts of writing from the Torah. Wearing *tefillin* reminds Jews that they should love God with all their heart and all their mind.

Jewish Festivals

Jews celebrate various festivals throughout the year, the first being **Rosh Hashanah** (New Year) which falls in September or early October, Jews eat special food, as well as apples dipped in honey, to wish each other and themselves a sweeter year to come.

'**The Days of Returning**', are days when Jews think about the days when they did wrong things in the past year. They make promises to themselves and to God, to try to do better the next year.

Yom Kippur is the tenth Day of Returning. This is the day when Jewish people ask God to forgive them for all the wrong they have done in the past year.

Sukkot is a hut that is built with an open roof so that you can see the sky, it is covered with branches. Jewish people live in it for the whole week of *Sukkot* festival. It is built because Jews at one time had no fixed home and this symbolises the way they used to live in the past.

Simchat Torah is when Jews think especially about the Torah. *Simchat Torah* is the day when the last part of the Torah is read, and the readings start from the beginning again. It is a day of happiness and children are given sweets and fruit.

Hanukkah is a festival that lasts for eight days. It takes place at the beginning of December. It is celebrated with special games presents and parties. *Hanukkah* reminds Jews of an event which took place many hundreds of years ago. It is a celebration of the reclaiming of the Temple, the most important place of worship in the Jewish religion, from the forces of an evil king. Jews use a special candlestick to celebrate *Hanukkah*. It is called a *Hanukiah*. It holds eight candles and an extra one which is used to light all the others. On the first night of the festival, they light one candle, on the second night two, and so on, until the last night of the festival, when all nine are lit. As they light the candles, they say special prayers.

Purim is celebrated nearly half-way through the Jewish year, normally February or March. This festival is marked by parties where masks and elaborate costumes are sometimes worn. *Purim* means "lots". The name refers to a time in the 5th century BCE when an official in the Persian

Empire called *Haman* made a plan to kill all the Jews and drew lots to decide when. During this festival, the Book of Esther from the Bible, is read aloud, to recall how Esther, the King's wife, helped to save her people from slaughter.

Passover is a week-long festival and is the best known of all Jewish festivals. It is held to commemorate the events related in the Book of Exodus in the Torah. The festival is called *Passover* because, When God sent a final punishment on Egypt to persuade Pharaoh to let his people go, the Angel of Death "passed over" the Hebrews and spared them. At the *Passover* meal the youngest child in the family asks why this night is different from all other nights. The father tells the story of the children of Israel's deliverance from slavery in Egypt (the Exodus). He tells of the harshness of life in Egypt, of Moses (PBUH) who led the Jewish people out of slavery, of how God gave Moses (PBUH) the Ten Commandments, and how God looked after Israel in the desert.

Lighting The Sabbath Candles

The Jewish day begins and ends at sunset. Therefore the *Sabbath*, which falls on a Saturday, actually begins on Friday evening. This is when the woman of a Jewish household kindles the "Sabbath Lights" and prays for God's blessing on her work and family. The *Sabbath* table is then laid with bread and wine. Before the meal the husband praises his wife and recites scriptures about creation and the *Sabbath*. Then he blesses the wine and bread and passes them round.

The 'Temple' was the most important place of worship for Jews. The first Temple was built in



Jerusalem by King Solomon (PBUH) almost three thousand years ago. It was destroyed when the Jews' country was taken over by the

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Babylonians, in 586 BCE. Then it was built again, but it was destroyed again by the Romans in 70 CE. The Temple was a beautiful building, decorated with gold and marble. Jews believe it was the holiest place in the world, and it was the most important place for worshipping god. Only one wall was left when it was destroyed, it was called the 'Western Wall'. The Western Wall is very important because it is all that is left of the most important building the Jews ever had.

The celebration of *Bar Mitzvah* is when a Jewish boy reaches thirteen years of age. It means 'a son of the commandments'. He is then considered to be a responsible adult and is expected to follow all the commandments of the law. For a girl the age of responsibility is twelve, this is when she has her *Bat Mitzvah*. *Bar/Bat Mitzvah* is a special service in the Synagogue when the boy and girl read from the Torah for the first time, this is followed by a celebration meal to mark their coming of age.

Orthodox Jews are often called 'Strict Jews'. They try to keep all the laws of Judaism as they have been kept for thousands of years. They believe that the Torah is the word of God. It tells people how God wants them to live and of the rules they should follow. The Torah will never change, although its teachings may not always be seen in the same way.

Progressive Jews are not all the same, but they all believe that Judaism can change. They do not keep all the laws of the Torah as strictly as Orthodox Jews. They believe that if a law does not seem to have a point any longer, it can be forgotten about. The changes in the law usually make it easier to live among people who are not Jews.

Similarly to Muslims, Jews are forbidden to eat certain types of food. There are laws about what food can and cannot be eaten and how foods should be prepared. Jews can only eat meat slaughtered in the Jewish tradition. This food is called *Kosher*.

Hinduism

The word "Hindu" comes from "*Hind*", the old Persian word for India. Hinduism simply means the religion of the peoples of India. With no founder and no creed it has evolved over time. Hinduism has grown to become the world's third largest religion, after Christianity and Islam.

It claims about 762 million followers -13% of the world's population. In the UK there are 400,000 Hindus, 160,000 of whom are active in their faith.

"God" and the universe

For Hindus, the entire universe is part of the Divine, everything is part of "God". Therefore "God", for Hindus, is present in everything.

"God" and gods

Hindus believe that each soul is an individual, and yet is also a part of the Divine, hence, is part of "God". Hindus acknowledge and worship various gods, but these are all aspects of the one supreme "God".

Most Westerners think that Hinduism is polytheistic, which means worshipping many gods, but in fact Hindus actually believe in only one supreme God, called "**Brahman**". *Brahman* is a supreme spirit that permeates everything. *Brahma* 'unfolds' into the *Trimurti*, the holy trinity made up of *Brahma*, *Vishnu* and *Shiva*. *Brahma* is the creator, *Vishnu* the great preserver, and *Shiva* the destroyer but also the recreator. Hindus believe *Brahma* is the creator of the universe and the god of wisdom. His wife



Saraswati, the goddess of art, music and literature. *Vishnu* is the preserver. He has appeared on earth in the past, at times of crisis, in nine different forms including, the fish, the dwarf, the tortoise, the Prince *Rama*, and the wise man *Krishna*. The 10th form is yet to appear.

Vishnu's wife, *Lakshmi* is the goddess of prosperity. *Shiva* is another god, he can be calm, loving but can also be frightening and destruc-

tive. *Shakti* is called the Mother goddess. She sometimes appears as a beautiful woman or an old evil woman who stands on a demon. *Agni* is the god of fire and sacrifice and god of the home because he was found in the fireplace of every household. *Indra* is the god of war famous for bravery and strength. He is also the god of storms and thunder. *Rama* is the *avatar* (a god or goddess appearing in physical form on Earth) of *Vishnu*. According to individual Hindu beliefs, there are many many gods, far too numerous to mention, these are all respected and revered in their own particular way.

Beliefs

Hindus perform “*Puja*” (daily worship) not only in the Temples, but also in the home. Many families set aside a room for worship; others erect a shrine or image, or display a holy picture in one corner.

Hindus everywhere believe in reincarnation, the individual soul born again in another body. Life flows on through many existences, from birth to death to rebirth. It is called *Samsara*. Hindus also believe in *Karma*, which is the accumulated sum of ones good and bad deeds. Karma determines how you will live your next life. Through pure acts, thoughts and devotion, one can be reborn at a higher level. Eventually, one can escape *Samsara* and achieve enlightenment. Bad deeds can cause a person to be reborn as a lower level, or even as an animal. The unequal distribution of wealth, prestige, suffering are thus seen as natural consequences for one's previous acts, both in this life and in previous lives.

Holy Scriptures

Among the most important of all Hindu sacred texts are the *Vedas*: the *Rig Veda*, *Sama Veda*, *Yajur Veda* and *Atharva Veda*. *Rig Veda* (a.k.a. *Rigveda*) is the oldest, having been composed about 1500 BCE and written down about 600 BCE. They contain hymns, incantations, and rituals from ancient India.

Another group of primary texts are the *Upanishadas*. They are a continuation of the *Vedic* philosophy, and were written between 800 and 400 B.C. They elaborate on how the soul (*Atman*) can be united with the ultimate truth (Brahman) through contemplation and mediation, as well as the doctrine of Karma.

The *Mahabharata*, were written 540 to 300 BCE, and have been attributed to the sage *Vyasa*. They record "the legends of the *Bharatas*, one of the Aryan tribal groups." The *Bhagavad Gita* is the sixth book of the *Mahabharata*. It is a poem describing a conversation between a warrior *Arjuna* and the God *Krishna*. It is an ancient text that has become central to Hinduism and other belief systems.

Another important text is the *Ramayana*. It is a moving love story with moral and spiritual themes. It is dated to the first century CE and has been attributed to the poet *Valmiki*. There are many other texts which include the *Brahmanas*, the *Sutras*, and the *Aranyakas*.

Hindu Festivals

There are hundreds of Hindu festivals throughout the year, large and small. Some Hindus celebrate the birthdays of gods, or other important times in their lives. Other festivals are linked to the changing of the seasons, harvest time or events in the family. There are far too many festivals to celebrate them all, but most Hindus celebrate the main festivals of **Diwali**, **Holi** and **Dussehra**. A special *puja* (worship) is held at home or in the temple, sweets and gifts are exchanged, and there is often music and dancing. Festivals are a good way for children to learn more about Hinduism and a time for friends and relations to meet up.



Diwali is one of the most important and joyful hindu festivals. It is celebrated in the end of October or the beginning of November and is the festival of lights. People light rows of small oil lamps and place them at their doors and windows to guide Rama back home after his long exile. He was banished for fourteen years because his stepmother persuaded her husband

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to make her son (*Baharata*) the king. *Diwali* is also a time for worshipping *Lakshmi*, the goddess of good fortune, and for businesses to start their new year's accounts. The *Diwali* celebrations last for five days. People exchange cards and gifts of silver and new clothes. There are also fireworks to watch and plenty of special *Diwali* food to eat.

The **Dussehra** festival is held in September. In eastern India, it celebrates *Durga's* victory over the buffalo demon. In other places, it marks *Rama's* victory over the demon king *Ravana*. This story is acted out as a play called the *Rama Lila*. On the last night of the performance, the actor playing *Rama* fires a burning arrow into a gigantic papier mache figure of *Ravana*. The figure is stuffed with firecrackers and explodes with a loud bang.

Holi celebrates the coming of spring in March or April. It is the most active and exuberant festival of the year. On *Holi* Eve, a bonfire is lit and a model of the wicked witch *Holika* is burned on it. The next day is when the fun begins. People wear their oldest clothes and throw brightly coloured water and powders all over each other. In the evening, they clean themselves and then visit their relations to wish them a happy Holi.

Raksha Bandhan is a family festival, which takes place in August. Sisters tie brightly coloured bracelets, called *rakhis*, around their brothers' right wrists to show their affection. They also ask for their brothers' protection in the coming year. In return, brothers must give their sisters some money or a gift.

Sikhism

Sikhism is the youngest of the world's four great monotheistic religions. It was founded in the 15th Century by **Guru Nanak**. There are 18-20 million Sikhs in the world and 80% of them live in the Punjab state in Northwest India, where the faith began. The word "Sikh" is Punjabi for "disciple" and Sikhs are disciples of the *Gurus* (a guru is a teacher). Sikh men are particularly easy to identify because they all have a full beard, and wear their hair uncut and contained in a turban.

The Sikh place of worship is called a *Gurdwara* or temple. Sikhism does not have priests, but

most *Gurdwara* will have a *Granthi*. A *Granthi* is a learned Sikh who is skilled in reading the scriptures; however, a *Granthi* has no special religious status. The principal Sikh scripture is the *Adi Granth*, often called the *Guru Granth Sahib*. Sikhs believe that the words of these scriptures are the present day embodiment of the Sikh *Guru* and they treat the book with the respect and devotion that they would have given to a human *Guru*.

The essence of being a Sikh is that one lives one's life according to the teachings of the Sikh Gurus. Additionally he devotes time to meditating on God and the scriptures, and does things to benefit other people. Sikhs believe that there is a single, all-powerful God, who created the universe and everything in it. Sikhism emphasises social and gender equality, and stresses the importance of behaving compassionately.



Sikhs believe that there is only one God who created the universe. The universe depends on God's will for its continued existence. God has always existed and always will. God needs nothing else in order to continue to exist. God has no shape, nor gender. God has never taken and will never take human form on earth. The essence of God is truth. God is without hatred or fear. God reaches out to humanity through the word, which is conveyed by the Gurus, or teachers, and which is laid down in the form of *shabads*, or hymns, which form the backbone of Sikh worship.

A guru is a teacher. There were ten human or living Gurus in Sikhism. The Gurus were human beings. They were not Gods, nor were they incarnations of God. The Gurus are never worshipped, although Sikhs hold the Gurus in high esteem, and pictures of them are often seen in Sikh places of worship and homes.

Guru Nanak

Guru Nanak founded the Sikh faith 500 years ago. He began his mission after a mysterious three-day disappearance at the river Bein near Sultanpur, India. When he re-emerged, he announced that God was beyond outward religious distinctions and that what mattered was to everyone to be a truly devout follower of his/her own faith. He spent the rest of his life teaching, writing hymns which his Muslim companion set to music, and travelling as far as Sri Lanka, Baghdad and Mecca to discuss religion with Muslims and Hindus.

The Last Guru

The *Guru Granth Sahib* and the *Panth Guru Gobind Singh* decided that there would be no further human Gurus after his death. He declared that the *Guruship* would be shared between the Sikh Holy Scriptures, called The *Guru Granth Sahib*, and the community of Sikhs, called the *Panth*. Nowadays the scripture is generally regarded as the Guru, and the role of the community is to safeguard the status of the scripture.

The Sikh Scriptures

The holy book installed in every Sikh *Gurdwara* is known as the *Adi Granth*, or *Guru Granth Sahib*. Sikhs believe the words to be divinely inspired, but not actually the words of God. The book is the focus of communal ceremonies including naming ceremonies and weddings as well as private devotion.

The *Guru Granth Sahib* is written in *Gurmukhi* (the script used to write Punjabi). It contains poetry and hymns, or *shabads*, which form the backbone of Sikh communal worship. Not only does the *Guru Granth Sahib* contain writings of some of the Sikh Gurus, but also texts by Hindus and Muslims.

Although its language is not easy to understand for many Sikhs today, modernising or translating it for devotional purposes is generally seen as inappropriate. In a *Gurdwara*, the *Guru Granth Sahib* is put on a special platform under a canopy. Worshippers bow or prostrate themselves before it as they enter the temple, and leave offerings next to it. Shoes must not be worn in its presence, and as a mark of respect no-one turns his or her back to it.

The Khalsa

The Khalsa is the central grouping of orthodox Sikhs. It consists of men and women who have been initiated into the Khalsa in the appropriate ceremony. The Khalsa was founded by the 10th and last living guru, Guru Gobind Singh in 1699. The Khalsa was founded to unite the Sikhs, and distinguish them from the followers of other faiths. It gave Sikhism a committed group of men and women.

Buddhism

The founder of Buddhism was called **Siddhartha Gautama** who lived in the sixth century BCE in northern India. He was brought up to become a king, and married to a beautiful princess who gave him a son. As a young prince, his father protected him from all the sadness of the world outside his palaces. However, while his son was still young, *Gautama* managed to slip out, and encountered the "Four Sights". First was an old man, second a man sick with disease and third a corpse being carried to the cremation ground. Finally, he saw a shaven-headed religious beggar, wearing a simple yellow robe, but radiating peace and joy.



It was then that *Gautama* made his "Great Renunciation", leaving his family and life of great comfort to find the answers to this suffering he had seen. For six years he tried and failed, until he went to meditate under a *Bodhi* tree, where he received his "Great Enlightenment", and became *Buddha*, which means "the enlightened one". The "Lord Buddha" then devoted the rest of his life to teaching the way to cease suffering. At the age of 80 he had a considerable following and a well organised community. After his death his body was cremated and his ashes distributed among his followers. They formed the original relics and were housed and worshipped in *stupas* (great

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sacred mounds). In parts of Asia stupas are called *pagodas*. Later, Temples were built, where worship was offered in the presence of Buddha and *bodhisattvas*. Buddhism has no unique creed, no single authority and no single sacred book. It focuses on each individual seeking to attain enlightenment. Buddhism has no omnipotent, creator God who exists apart from this or any other universe. Belief in a God of that kind is not part of Buddhism.

Dukkha

All existence is "*Dukkha*"; without permanence and therefore filled with suffering. *Dukkha* comes from a search to find something permanent in a world where nothing permanently exists. *Dukkha* can end in enlightenment and the state known as *nirvana*, where all action and interaction ceases. Life is a continuing process of birth and death, but there is no soul that is reborn in the continuing process of birth and death, only the process of one moment giving rise to the next.

The form, in which one is reborn, animal or human, in heaven or in hell, depends on *karma* (impersonal ethical law). One can escape from this process by attaining nirvana or enlightenment. Nirvana can be reached by following the *Eightfold Path* of: Right Understanding, Right Thinking, Right Speaking, Right Acting, Right Lifestyle, Right Endeavouring, Right Mindfulness and Right Contemplation.

There are two main groups in Buddhism. *Theravanda*, or *Southern Buddhism* strictly follows the rules set out by Buddha. Its scriptures are preserved in *Pali*, an ancient Indian language closely related to *Sanskrit*. *Mahayana*, or *Eastern Buddhism* is not so strict. Its scriptures are preserved in Chinese and are very diverse.



It has co-existed with Confucianism, Taoism, Shinto and Communism. It is found in Korea, China, Japan and Vietnam. *Theravanda* is closer in doctrine and practice to ancient Buddhism, which existed in the early years BCE in India.

Holy Books

There are many collections of Buddhist teachings, usually specific to geographical regions that are regarded as important. *Sutras*, containing the Buddha's advanced teaching, are treasured by Mahayana Buddhists, in addition to the *Pali canon*.

A Concluding Note...

Community Cohesion is the mission of all the major faiths of Britain. That is to create a society in which we can coexist equitably through understanding of each others faith and through positive dialogue, celebrating our similarities and respecting the differences. Knowledge is the key to understanding and understanding leads to peace and equity.

A final word from the Editorial Team

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