

World Religions in Brief

As we begin the study of Sikh history, we must first understand the world as it existed prior to the advent of Gurū Nānak. This requires us to first understand the early civilizations, their literature, religious doctrines and beliefs. The impact of Gurū Nānak's mission can be comprehended better by examining the ideologies that existed from 2000 BCE up to the fifteenth century CE.

These religions can be divided into three categories: Semitic religions, Aryan traditions and what the Western theologians term as 'philosophies' or 'ways of life'. By '*Aryan*' what is meant are the religions that came into being after the arrival of the Aryans on the Indian subcontinent. In the Aryan tradition we have Vedic, Buddhist and Jain philosophies. These religions must not be seen as Aryan or Hindu religious sects because nearly all of them were a revolt against what came to be known as the Hindu Dharam. Semitic religions include those disciplines that have a close connection with the faiths originating in the Middle East and have a common creation story. The Semitic religions commonly include Zoroastrianism, Judaism, Christianity and Islam. The third category that is placed somewhere between 'religion' and 'philosophy' comprises of Confucianism, Taoism and Shintoism. It seems that these are termed as philosophies in order to differentiate between 'revelatory' religions and whose founders (or their followers) did not claim prophet hood. But these 'philosophies' cover all aspects that a religion is supposed to cover, which is why we have listed them here. And we accept them as religions in the same plane as the first two categories. We will begin with a brief overview of the prophets, written cannon, and ideology of these faiths-Judaism, Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism, Christianity, Islam and Sikhi

TIMLELINE OF RELIGIONS

CIRCA	RELIGION
1700 BCE	Judaism
1500 BCE	Vedic Age
1200 BCE	Zoroastrianism
566 BCE	Buddhism
552 BCE	Confucianism
500 BCE	Jainism
400 BCE	Taoism
30 CE	Christianity
570 CE	Islam
600 CE	Shintoism
1499 CE	Sikhi

Judaism

Judaism is one of the most ancient faiths. The Jews claim their descent from the patriarch Abraham. Abraham (fl. c. 1800 BC) was from the Mesopotamian town of Ur of the Chaldees, which he left with his wife, Sarah, to dwell in the land of Canaan in Palestine. A famine drove them to Egypt, where Abraham acquired an Egyptian concubine named Hagar,

who served as Sarah's handmaid. Through Hagar, Abraham became the father of Ishmael, the progenitor of the northern Arabs. Through Sarah, Abraham later had a second son, named Isaac, the progenitor of the Jews. The Old Testament is a Jewish cannon and is the basis for the later development of Christianity and Islam.

Old Testament was originally written in Hebrew (with a few short sections in Aramaic, a closely related language) during the span of six or seven centuries. These books, thirty-nine in number, according to modern reckoning, are the records of a group of Semitic tribes, which became a nation after a period of slavery in Egypt. They would later conquer and settle in Palestine. They rose to considerable political prominence in that area for a short time under their kings, David and Solomon. According to Jewish reckoning, the Old Testament is divided into three sections: the Law, the Prophets and the writings.

Judaism is a monotheistic faith, which is based on the idea of a Covenant with God and adherence to the Torah. But we must keep this in mind that the covenant and monotheism date back to the time of Moses only. Before Moses, Judaism was polytheistic in its beliefs. Historians have not given a concrete date of origin for Judaism. However, it is commonly accepted that biblical Judaism existed between c. 20 BCE to 4 BCE. The Jewish people claim that Abraham was the father of the Hebrew people. Judaism is divided into many different sets of believers. The major divisions are: orthodox, reform, conservative, progressive, reconstructionist, and liberal. Most scholars however agree that Judaism is inseparable from the idea of peoplehood of Israel (Oxford, 512). Although, Islam and Christianity have the same belief in the Old Testament, Judaism rejects those who follow the Christian or Islamic traditions.

The Torah is the scripture, which contains the teachings of the faith. Many laws also govern Judaism. Jewish law is called Halakhah. These laws define various aspects of the Jewish life. It is important to note that within the Jewish Diaspora there is a strong sense of nationhood. "However varied their communities, all Jews see themselves as members of a community whose origins lie in the patriarchal period. Jewish history claims that the contents of the Halakhah can be traced to the revelation to Moses on Mount Sinai."

Judaism is not proselytizing. Since it does not seek converts there is a grave threat to its survival. The sentiments of one Jewish woman are telling: "Judaism is my inheritance. If I'm going to hand down an inheritance, the Jews have got to keep going—otherwise, what a terrible waste of suffering for all those thousands of years, if we're going to allow ourselves to disappear—through lack of effort, through lack of faith, through lack of love. I mean, what would God say? What would Abraham say? What a let down" (Oxford, 514).

The Jews differ from the Christians and Muslims in how they view the concept of prophet. While the Christians and Muslims have one 'prophet' each, the Jews have a tradition of God sending a prophet each time the Jewish people are in trouble. They have Minor Prophets and Major Prophets and a prediction of the coming of the messiah (which is shared by the Christians and the Muslims) who will finally deliver them.

Hinduism (Vedic)

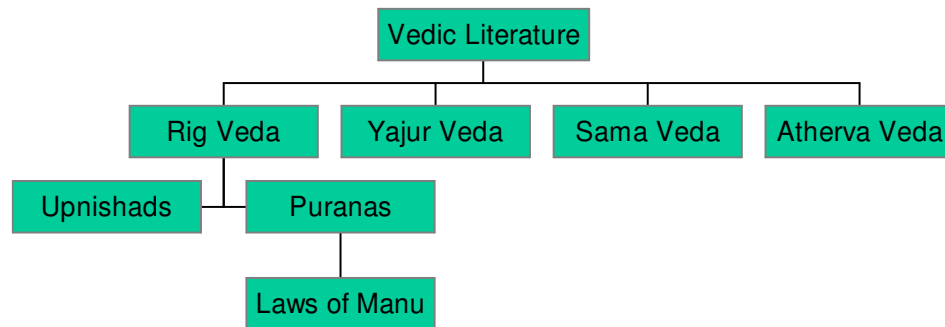
Within the dominant Indian culture and society, the Vedās are given utmost reverence and priority. They are said to have originated with the Aryans who invaded India and subjugated the Indus Valley civilization in 1500 BCE. Vedās are used as authority upon which the culture of this place is based, although Vedās were and are accessible to only a few. The tradition and the people following this literature are known as Hindu. The word ‘Hindu’ was coined by the Persians and can be found in many of the central Asian languages, though not present in any of the vernacular languages. In central Asian languages it generally means ‘black, slave, liar, thief, mean person etc’. According to a Turkish dictionary its meaning is a ‘thief or a dacoit’. Some claim that Persian invaders used to call, people living across the Sindhū River, as Hindus. But this argument doesn’t stand as the Persian language had and used the letter ‘sa’ even at that time as well as in the present.

In Arabic texts, Al-Hind is a term for the people of modern-day India and ‘Hindu’ was used towards the end of the eighteenth century by the British to refer to the people of ‘Hindustan’, the area of northwest India. The ‘-ism’ was added to ‘Hindu’ around 1830 to denote the culture and religion of the high caste Brahmins in contrast to other religions. The term was soon appropriated by Indians themselves in the context of establishing a national identity opposed to colonialism. Hinduism is often characterized as belief in reincarnation (samsāra) determined by the law that all actions have effects (karmā). Hinduism does not have a single historical founder, but still there are some kind of practices, texts and beliefs, which are central to the concept of being a ‘Hindu’ or a person who believes in Vedās.

The Vedā is a large body of literature composed in Sanskrit, a sacred language of Hinduism, revered as timeless revelation, which is not of human authorship. The term Vedā means ‘knowledge’, originally revealed to the ancient sages, conveyed to the community by them, and passed through the generations initially as an oral tradition, and finally put together in its present form by the sage Vyās. There are four Vedās (see attached chart). The one that is most commonly referred to and claimed to be the basis of Hindu thought, is the Rig-Vedā. Today’s Hindutva protagonist history teaches that all that is Hindu, emanated from the Rig-Vedā. However, there appears a remarkable dissonance in the textual practices and today’s Hinduism. “The religion of the Rig Vedā, although it contributed to certain facets of later day Hinduism, is nevertheless distinct from it” (Thapar, 43). “The prevalent attitude within the Vedic culture is dominance over others. “The Vedā depicts a life where I gain only at your loss, my prosperity entails your ruin, my continued existence depends on your death, my eating requires that you become food” (Doniger, 27).

Vedic Society & Varnāśrama-dharma: Two concerns, in particular, dominate the Dharmā Sūtras and Sāstras, one’s obligation (dharmā) with regard to one’s position in society, that is, the class (varnā), and obligation with regard to one’s stage of life (āśrama). These two concerns together became known as varnāśrama-dharma whose fulfillment was part of an essential definition of a Hindu.

Class (Varna) and Caste (Jāti): Vedic society was divided into four classes, Brahmans, Nobles or Warriors (rājanya, ksatriya), Commoners (vaisya) and the Serfs (sūdra). Of the four classes (varna), the highest three are known as the ‘twice-born’ (dvija) because their male members have undergone an initiation (upanayana), a rite of passage, which gives them access to being full members of society, who can marry and perpetuate the ritual traditions. This rite, which provides a system that separates the twice born from the fourth estate, the ‘serfs,’ and clearly marks the boundary between those who have access to the Vedic tradition and those who do not. Only the twice born classes were allowed to hear the Vedā and, while



in an earlier period all twice-born were eligible to learn it, only the Brāhmans came to be its guardians, learning it and reciting it during rituals. The Mannu Smṛti states clearly that the Brahman’s duty is to teach Vedā and sacrifice for others; the Ksatriyā’s is to practice arms and protect people; the Vaisyā should tend cattle, practice agriculture and money-lending; the Sūdrā should serve the other classes and practice art. Color, reflects the social hierarchy as well as the qualities (guna) which are present in varying degrees in all things. Brāhmans were associated with white, the color of purity and lightness, Ksatriyās with red, the color of passion and energy, Vaisyās with yellow, color of the earth, and Sūdrās with black, the color of darkness and inertia. The term jāti (birth) refers to those endogamous sections of Hindu society which we know as ‘castes’. It refers not only to social classes, but also to all categories of beings. Insects, plants, domestic animals, wild animals and celestial beings are all jātis. The following features characterize castes:

-Castes are arranged in a hierarchical structure in any region, with the Brāhmans at the top, the untouchables (Harijans/ Dalits) at the bottom. Between these is a wide array of other castes.

-The castes hierarchy is based on the polarity between purity and pollution, the Brahmans being the purest and untouchables, impure.

-The caste of any individual is inalienable; it is a property of the body and cannot be removed (except according to some traditions by initiation).

The Āśrama system: The second concept in the ideology of dharma is that of life’s stages (āśramas). The four stages are: that of the celibate student (brahmacārya), householder (grhastha), hermit or forest dweller (vanaprastha), and renouncer (samnyāsa).

Hindu narrative traditions: The two most important groups of Hindu narrative traditions embodied in oral and written texts are the two Epics, Mahābhārata and Rāmāyana, and the Purānas. The Itihāsa Purāna is even known as the ‘fifth Vedā’, although it is classified as

smṛti and not śruti, and all castes have access to it. Mahābhārata is the longest epic poem in the world, comprising over 100,000 verses. According to the tradition, author of the text was sage Vyāsa whose name means ‘an arranger’, though scholarship has shown that it was in fact compiled over several centuries from the first half of the first millennium BCE, reaching its established form by the first century CE. The second slightly shorter epic is Rāmāyana, the story of King Rāma, attributed to Vālmīki. As with the Mahābhārata there are two major recensions, the northern and the southern, the southern being the earlier. There are later Sanskrit versions of the text and versions were composed in vernacular languages. Bhagavad Gītā, the ‘Song of the Lord’, is perhaps the most famous of the Hindu scriptures. On the eve of the great battle between Pāndavas and Kauravas, Arjuna is faced with a moral dilemma; should he fight in the battle and kill members of his family or renounce and go begging for alms, thereby avoiding the inevitable bloodshed? There is a conflict within Arjun between his duty as a warrior and son of Pāndu to fight, and the ideal of non-violence (ahimsā). In response to this, Krishna exhorts him to go to battle, for not to do so would be unmanly and dishonorable. The main theme of Gītā can be summarized as: the importance of dharma; dharma and renunciation are compatible; action (karma) should be performed with complete detachment; the soul is immortal and until liberated is subject to rebirth; the Lord is transcendent and immanent; the Lord is reached through devotion (bhakti) by his grace.

The origin of Hinduism lie in two ancient cultural complexes, the Indus valley civilization which flourished from 2500 BCE to about 1500 BCE, though its roots are much earlier, and the Aryan culture which developed during the second millennium BCE. Indus valley civilization declined, to be replaced by the culture of the Aryans, an Indo-European people originating in the Caucasus region who migrated into South Asia and spread across the fertile, northern plains. The chronology of south Asia has been divided into ancient, classical, medieval and modern periods. It is important to remember that there are continuities between these periods:

-The Indus valley civilization (c. 2500 to 1500 BCE): Elements of Hinduism can be traced back to this period.

-The Vedic period (c. 1500 to 500 BCE): The rise of Aryan culture, in contrast to Dravidian, occurs during this period. During this period the Vedās and the texts of Dhamā and ritual were formulated and composed.

-The Epic and Purānic period (c. 500 BCE to 500 CE): This period sees the composition of the Māhabhārtā and Rāmāyanā, as well as the bulk of the Purānās. A number of important kingdoms arise, particularly the Guptā dynasty (c. 320 CE to 500 CE), and the great traditions of Vaisnavism, Saivism and Saktism begin to develop.

-The medieval period (c. 500 CE to 1500 CE): Sees the development of devotion (Bhakti) to the major Hindu deities, particularly Viṣṇū, Śivā and Devī. There are major developments in the theistic traditions of Vaisnavism, Saivism and Saktism.

-The modern period (c. 1500CE to the present): The rise and fall of two great empires, the Mughal and the British, and the origin of India as nation state. The nineteenth century sees

the rise of Renaissance Hinduism and the twentieth century the development of Hinduism as a major world religion.

Buddhism

Buddhism is a faith that prospered and originated on Indian sub-continent. However, today, traces of this great thought are mostly eradicated in the place of its origin. Although academics dispute the reasons for Buddhism's decline in India, many do point to the great assimilation of Buddhism into the Hindu fold. This faith began with the enlightenment of Gotama.

Towards the end of the seventh century B.C., in the city of Kapilavastu, the capital of a small kingdom of the same name situated in Central India at the foot of the mountains of Nepaul, north of the present kingdom of Oudh, the Buddha was born. He was named as Siddhārtha, His father Suddhodana, of the tribe of the Shākyas, a descendant of the great solar race of the Gautamides, ruled over the country. His mother, Māyā Devī, was the daughter of the King Suprabuddha. She died seven days after his birth. The orphan child was confined to the care of his mother's sister, Prajāpatī Gotamī, another of his father's wives, who at a later period, in the days of the Buddha's teaching, became one of his most fervent adherents. They tried to bind the young man to the throne by marrying him early to a beautiful girl beautiful girl Gopā, the daughter of Dandāpānī, of Shākya tribe.

One day, as he drove with a numerous escort through the eastern gate of the city, on his way to visit the garden of Lumbini, he met a decrepit old man, with wrinkled skin and bald head, whose veins and muscles stood out like cords, while his chattering teeth hardly permitted the utterance any word. On enquiring about the man from the charioteer, he got a reply that man was overcome by age with weakened senses, suffering had destroyed his strength; he had been cast aside by his relations, and because he was incompetent in business, he was abandoned. But his is not a condition peculiar to his family. In all living beings youth is conquered by age your father and mother all your relations and allies will end thus, it is the natural and fatal issue. Disheartened by the condition of the old man he returned without paying a visit to the garden.

A last meeting decided, and put an end to all his hesitation. He was leaving the city by the northern gate, where he saw a Bhikshu or mendicant, who by his calm, chastened, and reserved demeanor, seemed dedicated to the calling of a Brahama-chari; he stood with lowered eyes, fixing his gaze no further than the length of a yoke, in a befitting manner, wearing with dignity the garment of a monk and carrying an alms-bowl. 'Who is this man'; inquired the prince. Charioteer said that the man is one of those called Bhikshus; he has renounced all lustful desires, and leads a most austere life, he strives to subdue himself, and has become a mendicant. 'That is right and well said', replied Siddhārtha, "the choice of a religious life has ever been lauded by sages, it will be my resource and the resource of others, it will become to us an efflorescence of life, happiness and immortality."

The young prince having come to determination went home. If I can neither escape the fear of old age, nor sickness, nor death, nor decay, "O Lord if you cannot grant me these four chief things bestow on me at least one thing, grant that on disappearing from this earth I shall

be for ever freed from the vicissitudes of transmigration.” He decided to depart from his family and the people.

He died, or as the Buddhists legends say, he entered into Nirvana, in the eightieth year of his life. He was in the country of the Mallas, near the river Achiravatī, about half a mile northwest of the city of Kusi-nagara, when he was seized with a sudden faintness. He stopped in a grove of salas, under a tree of this species (*Shorea robusta*), and died. Hiouen-Thsang, a Chinese monk in 630 CE saw the four sala trees, all equal height, under which it was said the Buddha rested and drew his last breath.

Buddha viewed human existence as essentially miserable and sorrowful. His ideology is about eradicating this sorrow. Death is not considered a means of escaping this sorrow. The only way to release oneself from this miserable fate is to suppress desire. It also has a theory of rebirth and karma. According to this doctrine merits and demerits of a being in past existence determine one's condition in the present life. Buddha held that to be born is an evil, that the highest good is deliverance from rebirth, that good karma will effect such deliverance, and that the acquisition of good karma requires a strictly moral life. It is rather an astonishing fact that the Buddha, although preaching absolute renunciation and ascetic celibacy, not only respected family duties, but also placed them in the very first rank.

The Buddha himself wrote nothing, his principal adherents, assembled in Council directly after his death, settled in the Sūtras the words of the Master, and the doctrine which was about to become a dogma. The teachings of Gautama are normally summarized into the Four Noble Truths (āryāni satyāni), which in due order must indeed precede all the others and the Eight fold Path.

The following are the four truths:

1. The state of suffering or sorrow which assails man under one form or another.
2. The cause of suffering is the passions, sinful lusts.
3. Third Noble truth a fitting consolation for the sad reality of the first two, is that sorrow will cease by Nirvāṇa (cessation of sorrow), the supreme goal by the man's efforts.
4. The fourth truth, which forms the principal belief of Buddhism is the path leading to the cessation of sorrow the method of salvation, the way that leads to Nirvāṇa (*marga*, in Pālī *magga*).

Nirvana is generally defined as the extinction of personality, which is unique in Buddhist ideology. The way or method of salvation is called 'The Noble Eight fold Path'. The following are the eight divisions of the method.

1. Right view or belief that is faith and orthodoxy.
2. Right judgment or thought, which dispels all doubt and uncertainty.
3. Right words or speech that is perfect truthfulness.
4. Right action, pure and honest line of conduct, for the achievement of The Right Aims.
5. Right means of livelihood seeking for maintenance in an upright and sinless occupation, in other words by a religious profession.
6. Right endeavor that is the right application of the mind of all the precepts of the law
7. Right recollection or memory which retails a clear and exact recollection of past actions.

8. Right meditation, leading intellect even below to quietude bordering on that of the Nirvana.

Buddhism also has two major sects, which originated several hundred years after Gotama's death. They are *Hinyana* and *Mahayana* Buddhism. *Mahāyāna* (which means 'large vehicle') is the later development as opposed to the salient features of early Buddhism termed *Hinayāna* (meaning 'small vehicle'). Term 'Theravada Buddhism', which is now persistently used in Buddhist world was used by *Mahāyānists* for the *Hinayānists*.

Buddhism flourished under the rule of Ashoka in the third century BCE. Buddhists generally view his empire as that of the most just ruler. Ashoka adopted the Buddhist ethics as the philosophy of his reign.

Jainism

Jainism is believed to have come down to us through 24 teachers, called *Tīrthankars* (founders of the faith) *Rsabha* stands first in this list. However, the first 22 *tīrthankars* seems to be mythical and last two, historical personalities. Historical evidence places the existence of the 23rd and 24th teachers in the sixth century BC. The former was known as *Arhat Pārsva*. The latter, *Vardhamāna Mahāvīra* (599-527 BC), was a contemporary of Buddha.

The last teacher was *Vardhamāna*, also called *Mahāvīra*. He was the son of king *Siddhartha* of *Kundapura* or *Kundagrāma*. His parents were worshippers of *Parsva*. *Mahāvīra* lived 30 years among the householders under the name of 'Videha'. After his parents' death he made up his mind to retire from the world. He went through *Kundapura* to "a park called the *Shandapura* of the *Jnātr* and proceeded to the excellent tree *Asoka*" (p. 259), where he entered the life of houselessness. For a year and month he wore clothes and then he walked about naked. For more than 12 years he neglected his body and passed extreme self-mortification. He wandered over wide areas for preaching Jainism. The last 30 years of his life were spent in teaching his religious system and organizing his order of ascetics. Jainism was fortunate to have a strong royal patronage. *Mahāvīra* had the greatest patrons in *Bimbisāra* and *Ajātaśtru* of *Magadha* and in *Chetaka*, his own uncle of the *Lichavi* dynasty. *Chetaka*'s daughters helped much to propagate this faith. Hence it shows that Jainism was an established religion in *Kalinga* and that the *Nandas* were its devotees. The *Mauryas* also were its staunch supporters.

Jainism originated in the *Ganges* basin. Eventually, the religion developed its base in *Mathura*. Jainism also has traces of ancient teachings linked to the *Indus Valley Civilization*. According to Jain teachings, the main aim of spiritual endeavor lies in renouncing the world and freeing the soul from *karma*. Jain teaching lays stress upon the doctrine that man's personality is dual, comprising both material and spiritual natures. It rejects the *Vedāntic* doctrine of the universal soul. Overall, Jainism rejects the idea of a creator God. This faith allows every soul to have the potential for spiritual enlightenment. However, Jainism is based on strict discipline and radical asceticism in order to attain ultimate spiritual bliss. The monks and nuns take on five vows, which they follow rigidly. These are *ahimsa* (non-injury); *satya* (speaking the truth); *asteya* (not taking anything not given); *brahmacharya* (chastity); and *aparigraha* (detachment from places, persons and things).

Jainism is more commonly known in the world due to its strict adherence to the idea of *ahimsa* (non-violence). Within this context, Jain followers used to sweep the ground before they walked and wore masks so as not to harm any living thing. However, one must note that this idea is also a marked departure from the common Hindu practice of sacrificing animals. It also rejects the Vedās and other Hindu practices. Jains believe that not only, men and animals, but also plants, minerals capable of growth, air, wind and fire possess souls (*jīva*) endowed with various degrees of consciousness. They hold that it is possible to inflict pain on a stone, or even on air and water. Because of Jainism's vow of *ahimsa* it passively folded into Brahmanism, without putting up any struggle against assimilation.

Christianity

Christian faith is based on the life and teachings of Jesus Christ of Nazareth. It is the disclosure by God to Jesus on how to reconcile the self with God. Jesus is believed to be the Son of God. He was born to Jewish parents in Palestine. He fulfilled his ministry at the time when Pontius Pilate was the Roman governor of the province. Those Jews who began to follow Jesus' teachings did so because they believed he was the Messiah promised by the prophets of the Old Testament. There are three major events in Jesus' life that forms the basis of Christian thought and worship of Christ. They are Immaculate Conception, Resurrection and Ascension.

Christians believe in one God, who created humankind, humans are essentially good but sinful in living. Therefore the death and resurrection of Christ represents the salvation of humankind. Although God is believed to be one, He is represented as three in one person, which is known as the Trinity of God (He is the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit). Christ is his manifestation as Son. Within this context, it is Christ who will pass judgment on the people at the end of the world. He will decide who will enter the kingdom of heaven and who will spend eternity in hell.

The essence of Christian message may be given in the words of a verse from the Bible; 'God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself, no longer holding men's misdeeds against them' (2 Cor. 5: 19- New English Bible). The Bible has a central place in the life and worship of the Christian church. Acts of worship usually include reading from both, the Old and the New Testaments. In private devotion and meditation, a Christian uses Bible. The Bible consists of two collections of books known as Old Testament and the New Testament. The Old Testament is the sacred scriptures of the Jew as well as the first part of the Christian scriptures. Christianity arose within the Jewish religion and was at first reckoned as one of its sects, and Old Testaments formed its sole scripture for the first century or more of its existence. New Testament was for the most part written during the second half of the First century of Christian era. The greater part of the New Testament was accepted as authoritative by the end of the 2nd century, but doubts still remained about a few.

Just as Christ gives his followers a share in his sacrifice through the Eucharist, so also does he give them a share in his priesthood and sovereign authority. This requires a special kind of commitment in which one must make a public act of allegiance to Christ and adherence to the spiritual family that he established namely the church. This is done in another religious service, which was also instituted by Christ and is called baptism. The word means washing

or plunging into water. Baptism is an initiation just as circumcision is for the Jews. It is identification with Christ; the true son of God, by which men become true children of God, sharing his eternal life.

Many centuries after Christianity parted ways with Judaism, many Christians continued to believe that Jewish Torah should still be observed. But majority believed that keeping Torah was not a pre-condition for being in covenant relation with God. The parting of ways occurred when the consequences of Christ were universalized and made applicable to all people. The parting was complete when after the fall of Jerusalem in 70 CE, Judaism became increasingly hostile to the Christians, which led to Christian anti-Semitism which (though moderated) continues to this day. In the early centuries, Christianity was seen with suspicion because it was 'a new and noxious superstition'. The reason could be that it propagated an exclusive monotheism that contrasted with prevailing Graeco-Roman syncretisms. This eventually led to a conflict with imperial authorities and resulted in 'Christian martyrs'. Wherever martyrdom occurred, Christianity seemed to have gained more strength, which led to the witness and cult of martyrs gaining in strength. But real expansion of Christianity started when Constantine gave his support to the Christians. After Theodosius I (emperor from 379 to 395) recognized Christianity as the religion of the Empire, it became the major religion of the Roman world.

Islam

The Prophet: Abu al-Qasim Muhammad belonged to the family Banu Hashim of Qureysh tribe. He was born to Abdull and Amina, daughter of Wahab of Zuhra clan, also belonging to the same tribe. As the tradition goes, He was born in Mecca on Monday, but the precise date of his birth is not actually known, and is variously said to be between 567 and 573 CE, the commonly accepted date being c. 570 CE. Muhammad was born four months after the death of his father. He was six, when his mother also passed away and he was under the care of his grandfather Abd-al-Muttalib, who is said to have taken the orphan to Kaaba to be presented to the shrine deity Hubal. It is said that when he was still small, two figures who were later identified as angels, visited him. The angels 'opened his chest and stirred their hands inside'. This was the first of many unusual experiences that Muhammad experienced in his life. On the death of his grandfather, two years later, his Uncle Abu Talib, an influential man of Mecca, took charge of him. These early years were uneventful, and he was employed, like other lads, in tending the goats and sheep of Mecca. In about 582, when he was twelve, Abu took him to Syria on a business journey lasting several months. Until he was over twenty, Muhammad continued to travel with him on his caravan trek to northern Arabia, Palestine and Syria, where he came across Christians and Jews and became acquainted with their lifestyle. This may explain the similarities between Jewish, Christian and Islamic teachings. It was here that he met the monk named Bahira, who was the first to recognize the signs of a messiah in him.

When he was twenty-five, Abu recommended him to a rich widow of the Qureysh tribe. Khadija, daughter of Khuwaylid, was already twice widowed and the mother of two sons and a daughter by her former husbands. He was entrusted with the management of her trading enterprise. In 595, shortly after joining her service, Muhammad married her, and thereafter till his flight to Medina in 622, lived in her house. Khadija is generally said to have been

forty years old at the time of her marriage to the prophet, but one writer, Ibl Habib, records that she was twenty-eight. This seems more likely, since she bore Muhammad two sons, Kasim and Abdulla, both of whom died in infancy (Muhammad was often called Abul Kasim, after his son, Kasim), and four daughters; Zaynab, Rokaya; Umm Kulthum and Fatima. Only Fatima survived the Prophet, and it was only through her that the line of the Prophet was perpetuated. Khadija died in 619 when Muhammad was forty-nine. Her tomb is in the valley just above Mecca. A few weeks later his uncle, Abu Talib, also died.

One day (c. AD 610), when Muhammad was about forty years old, he withdrew himself alone to a cave at the foot of Mount Hira, a stony hill about three miles north east of Mecca. That same night, the twenty-seventh night of Ramadan, called the Koran the Night of Power (laylat-al-kadr), while rapt in meditation, he heard a voice that commanded him saying, 'Read (ikra),' and he asked, 'What shall I read'. He said that he was not a reader, at which point he felt squeezed so that he could barely breathe. The voice repeated, 'Read in the name of Allah who created man from a clot of blood (a drop). Read, for the lord is beneficent and has taught man the use of the pen (kalam), and by that pen, He teaches man what he knows not.' This is said to be the first revelation of the Prophet which forms the beginning of the earliest chapter of the Koran (Sura 96). This presence was later identifies as angel Gabriel/Jibril. In Koran, Muhammad is referred to as the 'unlettered' (ummi) prophet. He could not read or write. It was asserted by Muslim theologians that he was not to be regarded as a man of book learning. It was necessary to have a prophetic vessel unpolluted by 'intellectual' knowledge of scripts, in order that a pure scripture might be produced. The illiteracy of the prophet thus confirms the miraculous origin of Koran.

Muhammad initially thought that he had gone mad and even thought of killing himself but was dissuaded by Khadijah. It was not until c. 613 CE that Muhammad began preaching publicly. As the teachings of Muhammad contradicted the beliefs of the establishment, he became the focus of persecution. As it grew worse, he was invited to Yathrib to make his way of unity a practical reconciliation between the two feuding ruling families there. This move was made in 622 CE, and is termed as Hijra by the Muslims. This is also the point from where the Islamic calendar, Hijri, starts. It was here that the first Muslim community was established. (Most of the pre-Islamic Arab tribes followed a lunar calendar, which Muhammad retained and which Muslims still use. Friday, a day dedicated to the moon in many pagan communities was the day appointed for public assembly (juma) among the ancient Arabs. The first day of the Muslim era was a Friday. During all this time Muhammad continued to receive revelations. Yathrib became known as 'al-Madina' (the City'). In February 623 a few months after he had settled in Medina, Muhammad organized his first raiding expedition (razya) against a Mecca caravan. Hostilities from Mecca did not cease and eventually led to the Battle of Badr in 624 CE. Here a small army of Muslims defeated a much larger army of the Meccans. The result was reversed in 625 CE in the Battle of Uhud. Eventually, in 630 CE, the hostilities ended when Muhammad led his followers to capture Mecca and freed it of its idols.

In all Muhammad organized well over 100 raiding expeditions. Muhammad died at the noon of a Monday on 8th June 632 CE, without a son or successor. He was the last and the greatest and considered to be the seal of prophets. All the prophets before him were only his forerunners. Due to the conflict of successorship, Islamic people got divided into Shias and

Sunnahs. Shias accepted Ali ibn-abi-Talib as the successors to Muhammad while the Sunnah did not. On this issue Shias broke off from the majority. Ali eventually became the fourth Caliph in the faith. Thus the successors became known as Caliphs or Khalifas. The first four Caliphs were amongst the earliest converts to Islam and trusted companions of Muhammad himself. The Caliphate continued well into the 20th century. The first four Caliphs, according to their Caliphate, were: Abu Bakr (632-634); Umar ibn-al-Khattab (634-644); Uthman ibn-Affan (644-656); Ali ibn-abi-Talib (656-661).

Islam believes in the Jewish bible, however the revelations to Muhammad are the true cannon of this faith. It wholly rejects the Christian idea of the trinity. The word Islam can be simply translated to mean surrender. This surrender is only to the One Supreme Being, Allah. The Allah, a name said to be derived from the root al, ‘god’, which itself is based on the phoneme l, the nucleus of the divine name in many Semitic language. To distinguish him from the other gods, he was given the title of Allah Taala, ‘God Most High’. He was revered mainly by those pre-Islamic Arabs who tended to monotheism and even the Arabs Jews and Christians of those days referred to God as ‘Allah’. In the Koran (7:179) it is said that Allah has ‘most excellent names’ (asma-al-husna). Three female deities named in the Koran (53:19)- Allat, Ozza and Manat-deserve special brief mention. In the Hejaz these three goddesses, who presided over the planetary bodies, were spoken of as the ‘daughters of Allah’ (banat Allah)

Sikhī

Five hundred years ago, Gurū Nānak’s divine experience inspired a revolution in South Asia that sought to reform the social and religious conditions of the time. Gurū Nānak, the first Gurū-Prophet, transformed a society in which blind faith, religious rituals, and social inequalities were a norm. In this new society, all people would follow faith intelligently and devoutly, in conjunction with an acceptance of equal rights and statuses. This revolution directly resulted from the formation of Sikhī - a belief system and way of life - as revealed to Gurū Nānak in the early sixteenth century. Over the next 240 years, each of the following nine Gurū-Prophets would contribute to the revolution through the articulation of theology and the establishment of institutions.

The Sikh faith emerged in the context of the Muslim-Hindu confrontation, a conflict representative of the colliding Semitic and Aryan cultures. This clash occurred in the South Asian region of Pañjāb – the land of five rivers. But rather than attempting to combine the two belief systems, Gurū Nānak laid the foundations for a distinctly revealed and monotheistic faith; a religion with its own prophet-hood, scripture, and ethical code.

Basic Beliefs

The Sikh vision seeks to create an open, progressive society while developing an organized resistance to the perversion of mind. As the individual seeks to experience Love in its purest form, all thoughts and actions translate into a continually flowing celebration of life. Sikhs

aspire to live in the glory of God and love for humanity through spiritual experiences, but at the same time, they are responsible for contributing to the global community.

In the *Mūl Mantr*, the opening and root verse of the Sikh scriptural canon, Gurū Nānak expresses various qualities of the Almighty. This reflection of the Divine illustrates what a Sikh should strive for - perfection through the development of godly attributes:

ੴ	ik oāṅkār	One Universal Integrative Force
ਸਤਿ ਨਾਮੁ	sati nāmu	Identified by Truth
ਕਰਤਾ ਪੁਰਖੁ	kartā purakhu	Pervasive Creator
ਨਿਰਭਉ	nirbhau	Fearless
ਨਿਰਵੈਰੁ	nirvairu	Without Enmity
ਅਕਾਲ ਮੂਰਤਿ	akāl mūrati	Timeless Being
ਅਜੂਨੀ	ajūnī	Unborn
ਸੈਭੰ	saibhaṅ	Self-Illumined
ਗੁਰ ਪ੍ਰਸਾਦਿ	gur prasādi	Attained by the Grace of the Gurū

Three basic tenets of Sikh living are:

- *Nām japnā* – Remembrance
To be in constant remembrance of the All-pervading; introspective living
- *Kirat karnī* – Earn
To earn in a just manner with integrity and honesty; truthful living
- *Vanḍ chaknā* – Share
To benefit peers and share with the needy; distributive living

Gurū in the Sikh Tradition

The term ‘gurū’ is derived from two words: gū – darkness, and rū – light. Essentially, a gurū is one who dispels darkness. In the Sikh tradition, the Gurū stands as a line of prophet-genius; an institution which guides the seeker from ignorance to enlightenment. It is the message of the Gurū that plays a stimulating role as the link between a Sikh and Realization.

As the Gurūs were blessed with indistinguishable experiences of the All-Knowing, they enjoyed a common spiritual wisdom or ‘divine light.’ The Gurūs shared their thoughts and messages in musical arrangements, revelatory messages composed to provide humanity a path to godliness. Their compositions were compiled into the Gurū Granth Sāhib, which was granted spiritual authority by Gurū Gobind Singh in 1708. Nine years earlier, the Tenth Nānak had given physical authority of the Sikhs to the *Khālsā Panth*, the order of committed Sikhs. As the *Khālsā Panth* operates in accordance with the Gurū Granth Sāhib, these two institutions jointly serve as Gurū Granth-Panth, the present Gurū of the Sikhs.

It is important to note that the Gurūs clarified that they were human beings, and therefore, not to be worshipped. Of equal importance, Gurūdom was not a role which one inherited through lineage, but instead, a position given by merit: only the perfect were recognized as what Sikhs refer to as ‘The True Sovereign.’ Since all Gurūs are considered part of one Divine Light, they shared the single identity of Nānak.

Gurū	Order	Gurūdom
Gurū Nānak	Nānak I	1469 – 1539
Gurū Angad	Nānak II	1539 – 1552
Gurū Amardās	Nānak III	1552 – 1574
Gurū Rāmdās	Nānak IV	1574 – 1581
Gurū Arjan	Nānak V	1581 – 1606
Gurū Hargobind	Nānak VI	1606 – 1644
Gurū Harirāi	Nānak VII	1644 – 1661
Gurū Harikrishan	Nānak VIII	1661 – 1664
Gurū Teghbahādur	Nānak IX	1664 – 1675
Gurū Gobind Singh	Nānak X	1675 – 1708
Gurū Granth-Panth		1708 -

Gurū Granth Sāhib

The Gurū Granth Sāhib is the scriptural canon of the Sikhs, a compilation of revelatory writings by enlightened individuals. It includes compositions from six Gurūs, three devotees, fifteen saints of various religious traditions, and several bards from the Gurū’s court. The inclusion of non-Sikh contributors highlights the Sikh faith’s universal nature, a universality that stems from the belief that people from any faith structure can experience Oneness.

The Gurū Granth Sāhib is written in *Gurmukhī*, a script institutionalized by Gurū Angad (Nānak II). Every hymn is written to a musical measure called a *rāg*. Initially known as the Ādi Granth, it was compiled by Gurū Arjan (Nānak V) and placed in Darbār Sāhib, Amritsar in 1604. After Gurū Gobind Singh had the compositions of Gurū Teghbahādur (Nānak IX) added to the Ādi Granth, he raised the canon to the status of Gurūdom, ordaining it as the Gurū Granth Sāhib in 1708.

Gurū Granth Sāhib is an infinite prayer embracing only those parts of universal cultures that have the potentialities to be generous, sublime, and impartial. Its revelation admits no intrusion that might disturb the flow of its spiritual creativity: the message is general in its application to people from all walks of life. It contains a timeless value system, untainted by temporal or secular matters. The Gurū Granth Sāhib is not a code of ethical conduct or social organization, though it proposes a social context for practice of religion and ethical conduct. These ideas remain unchanged in the consideration of self-interest – the beliefs are uncompromising in their principles. Witnesses of the canon observe the uniqueness of

scriptural status encompassing the lively excellence of soul, body and society as articulated in the Gurū Granth Sāhib.

The Birth of the Khālsā

On Vaisākhī day in 1699, Gurū Gobind Singh institutionalized the ‘Order of committed Sikhs,’ commonly known as the Khālsā. After inaugurating five devoted Sikhs in the presence of the entire congregation, the Gurū asked them to initiate him in the same manner, thus emphasizing the equality in the relationship between the Gurū and his disciples. This action institutionalized the idea of leader-servant introduced by Gurū Nānak over 200 years earlier.

Since its inception, the initiation ceremony has become mandatory for all Sikhs. Once an individual makes this commitment, that person is responsible for upholding the discipline as expressed in the *Panthic Rahit Mariādā*, Sikh code of conduct. In the decision to become a member of this order, one voluntarily surrenders the self to the Gurū, an action that indicates a continuous effort to live according to the Gurū’s wisdom. Although it is necessary, this decision is not an end in itself; rather, the journey of spirituality only begins in this humble submission.

The *Panth* was an order where people would strive for perfection, an institution established as a result of the contributions made by the nine Gurū-prophets preceding Gurū Gobind Singh. The groundwork set by Gurū Nānak had been cultivated by each Gurū, developing a community whose responsibility progressed, and finally culminating in the creation of the Khālsā Panth. This individual was to be a saint-soldier with high moral and excellent character. Whether man or woman, the Khālsā would be strong, courageous, learned, and wise. They would live their life with great discipline and honesty, and the combination of virtue and courage is the strength of this order. The order was an assurance against the ruthless exploitation of masses by their masters, and a device for overcoming hurdles that lied in the practice of holiness and spiritualism. Gurū Gobind Singh commanded his followers to use the sword only as a last resort, that is, when all peaceful methods have failed – an idea justified by the Gurū’s ordinance to fight for self-defense, protection of the oppressed, and the establishment of a Sikh nation-state. This was the spirit of the Khālsā.

The Sikh Identity

The significance of the ‘articles of faith’ is situated in the relationship between a Sikh and the Gurū. As adherents recognize these articles as gifts from their beloved Gurū, these objects are worn with absolute love and appreciation. The Sikh identity is such that every action stands as a reflection of the people – every Sikh is a representative of the faith. Therefore, the Sikh appearance also encourages its adherents to continually portray the community in a positive light. The five K’s, as they are popularly termed, are:

1. *Kes* – uncut hair

2. *Kaṅghā* – comb
3. *Kaṛā* – iron bracelet
4. *Kach* – soldier-shorts
5. *Kirpān* – traditional sword

Sikhs also wear a *dastār* – turban as a head covering for their unshorn hair. This unique external identity, an assertion of sovereignty and a major part of the Sikh psyche, resonates the Sikh values of realizing the nobility and divinity within each individual.

The Sikh code of conduct was not created as a means to achieve the end; in other words, it is not the spiritual authority of the Sikhs. Rather, the discipline was devised to guide Sikhs in their journey – each protocol was deliberately established to assist individuals in their everyday living as members of the faith. The code of conduct also provides a framework for unity through the provision of procedural implementation.

Along with maintaining the five articles of faith, Sikhs are required to refrain from:

1. Trimming, shaving or removing hair from the body
2. Eating *halāl* or sacrificial meat
3. Consuming tobacco, alcohol, or recreational intoxicants of any type
4. Engaging in extramarital affairs