

Peace and Conflict

- as understood in Hinduism, Islam and Sikhism

HINDUISM

Who are the main figures within Hinduism?

Hinduism is the oldest of the major world religions, going back at least 5000 years. It has no single founding figure and indeed many scholars have argued that it is largely a western construct, an attempt to coalesce similar religious and social ideas encountered by western missionaries and the British colonising forces in India. This would account for the different branches and divergent beliefs and practices found amongst Hindus in different parts of India, and the world, today. The name itself comes either from an old name for a group of people who lived in northern India, or from the name of a river in northwest India. Many Hindus today prefer their religion to be known as *Sanatan Dharma* (eternal truths).

One misconception of Hinduism is that it is a polytheistic religion (believing in many Gods). It is more correct to say that it is a pluralistic religion suggesting that we all relate to God in different ways and therefore God can be manifest in many different ways, as a personality with a form or with no form, or as a principle underlying everything. Hindus would argue that God, being infinite, has the power to become finite, and can therefore inhabit a finite form. This explains why Hinduism includes many images of gods and goddesses, sometimes showing God's divinity through superhuman attributes such as many heads or arms. These gods and goddesses are ways of showing something about the nature of God that cannot be described.

The main way of viewing God as having a personality with a form is the concept of *trimurti* (three in one). God is depicted in three forms:

- *Brahma* (the creator of the universe)
- *Vishnu* (the preserver or sustainer of the universe)
- *Shiva* (the destroyer of the universe)

Different groups of Hindus might be devoted to a particular one of these *trimurti*. God can also be seen in the form of the female consorts of the three gods of the *trimurti*:

- *Saraswati* (consort of Brahma symbolising knowledge and austerity)
- *Lakshmi* (consort of Vishnu and the goddess of wealth and beauty)
- *Parvati* (consort of Shiva and personifying Shakti or cosmic power)
- *Durga* (destroyer of evil) and *Kali* (the fierce all-destroyer) are two more female forms of God

As well as these gods and goddesses there are also *avatars*. An *avatar* is the human form that Vishnu takes on when he comes to earth. The most famous forms are *Rama* (the ideal man, and the hero of the epic poem the *Ramayana*), *Krishna* (the perfect avatar and author of the *Bhagavad Gita*), and *Buddha* (the ninth avatar and founder of Buddhism).



Rama's consort is *Sita* who is the personification of loyalty, devotion and chastity and is the ideal woman. Krishna's consort is *Radha* with whom he shares a spiritual rather than physical love, symbolising the love between the devotee and God. Two other well-known figures of Hindu worship are *Hanuman* and *Ganesh*. Hanuman is a man with a monkey face and he embodies strength and intelligence. He is Rama's dedicated servant in the Ramayana and is a role model for young people. Ganesh is the son of Shiva and Parvati and is shown with an elephant head. He is the remover of obstacles and symbolises good luck.

Another approach to God in Hinduism is that God is a principle underlying everything (*Brahman*). Brahman is in everything and everyone, and everything and everyone is part of Brahman.

This pluralistic approach means that Hinduism is a very tolerant religion. There is no claim that a particular god is the right one, and Hindus do not practice conversion. People should worship God in the way that is right for them.

What are the main Hindu beliefs?

Hindus believe that in life one has to perform certain duties or *dharma*, and everyone must do their dharma as best they can. This is often connected to ideas about hereditary caste. Different people are seen as having different abilities and therefore different duties. The abilities are connected to their past lives and by doing their duty as best as they can in one life situation, it will be possible to be born into a better situation in the next life. Over time this idea developed into a caste system by which people were born into particular groups or *varnas*. The most important group was the *Brahmins* or priests, followed by the soldiers (*Kshatriyas*), the traders and farmers (*Vaishyas*) and finally the servants (*Shudras*). Over time these groups were divided further into *jatis* or castes, usually based upon jobs. Many Hindus believe that people born into higher jatis are more pure than those born into lower ones. The lowest jati of all is the 'untouchables' (*Harijans*) who tend to do the dirtiest jobs including working with leather. With a shift in Indian society which has seen many young people move from the rural areas into the cities, jobs are no longer as strictly connected to caste and marriages are no longer always conducted along caste lines. Although hereditary caste is not a religious construct, it is connected to Hindu ideas of dharma and *karma*.

Karma is the idea that every action one performs has a consequence, either good or bad. Good actions will lead to a build-up of good karma, and bad actions will result in bad karma. As Hindus also believe in reincarnation (the idea that the soul or *atman* moves after death to another body) the karma that is built up over a lifetime will affect a person's next life. This cycle is called *samsara* and to break free of it is what every Hindu hopes to achieve. The end of *samsara* is *moksha*, when the soul breaks out of the cycle of birth and rebirth and joins with Brahman.

Hindus also believe that because Brahman is in everything, everything is sacred and should be treated with the utmost respect. A central idea of this teaching is *ahimsa* or nonviolence. Living beings are more sacred than non-living beings, and humans more sacred than animals and plants but all should be treated well, and as humans are the stewards of creation it is their duty to live with *ahimsa* toward all things. Many Hindus are



vegetarians and none eat beef as the cow is considered to be a particularly sacred animal. There is also a strong mandate towards caring for the environment within Hinduism, as the earth is essentially God. The most famous Hindu practitioner of ahimsa is Mahatma Gandhi, who was a key figure in the overthrow of British rule in India and helped bring about Indian Independence.

Where do Hindus worship?

Because Hindus believe that God is in all things, they also believe that everything they do can be an act of worship. In terms of more formal worship Hindus can worship both in temples (*mandirs*), and at home. A large mandir will often have a main shrine room and other smaller rooms with shrines to gods considered not quite so important. Each mandir has at least one priest whose job it is to look after the *murtis* (statues of the gods and goddesses), and help the devotees to worship. The murti is woken up at dawn, washed and clothed before offerings are made to it. Worshippers coming to the mandir for *puja* (worship) will remove their shoes and bring gifts to be given as an offering. Worship happens throughout the day and depending on the type of Hinduism, it may be carried out in groups at selected times or by individuals at times convenient to them.

In a Hindu home there will be a shrine containing murtis or pictures of murtis. Puja at home will take place at least once a day and will involve washing and drying the murti as a sign of respect to God. Gifts are offered to it and flowers may be hung around its neck. Worship begins with the sacred word *Aum* (or Om) and can continue with chanting of mantras from the holy books.

Meditation is another form of Hindu worship, although this is considered a difficult exercise for those with responsibilities as ignoring responsibilities goes against one's duty, and meditation is only really fruitful if one can forget everything around them. Meditation is actually seen as more than mere worship; it is one way in which moksha can be attained. For this reason, some Hindus choose to live the life of an ascetic and focus purely on meditation.

Peace and Conflict within Hinduism?

Hinduism contains within it both, a powerful commitment to peace and nonviolence, and also a spiritualisation of violence as well.

The language of 'nonviolence' has its primary origins in India. While found in many aspects of Hinduism, influenced by the Jain the concept of *ahimsa*:

- The word *han* means 'to kill'
- The word *hims* means 'to desire to do harm'
- The word *ahimsa* means 'to renounce the desire to kill or harm'

This word *ahimsa* was highlighted within mainstream Hinduism by Gandhi (1869-1948), whose peace witness inspired many, including Martin Luther King Jr (1929-1968) and the American Civil Rights Movement in the 1960's. All these facts have combined to give the idea of 'nonviolence' such a prominent place in peace thinking and vocabulary.

Alongside the *ahimsa* theme there is (as we have seen) Shiva 'the destroyer' and the two female deities *Durga* (destroyer of evil) and *Kali* (the fierce all-destroyer), each of whom seek to resolve the philosophical issues of violence in the universe and (on occasions) can



be invoked to support acts of violence. Added to this there is the story of the Bhagavad-Gita where prince Arjuna is facing his blind uncle the king on the battlefield. Overwhelmed with doubt as to the moral action required, he turns to his chariot-driver (the god Krishna disguised as a warrior) for advice. He is told that in his role as a warrior and prince it is his sacred duty to fight (even his relatives), embrace one's fate and trust to destiny.

ISLAM

What is Islam?

One helpful description of Islam is:

*“A community (the Muslim people), following its holy book (the Qur’an), according to precedent (the life of Mohammed (PBUH) - often as recorded in the Sunna or Hadith)”*¹

In a global climate where Muslim relationships both within Islam and with the wider global community are at the forefront of life in a number of different areas, it has become increasingly important for us to have a deeper understanding of what Islam is and how we can relate to Muslims. We are confronted day after day with news from around the world and indeed from our own doorstep that involves Islam on one level or another and as Britain becomes more multicultural, inter-faith friendships and relationships are becoming more commonplace. With these two areas in mind in particular, many people feel that we are facing two different ‘Islam’s; the Muslims that we meet at work or who live next door to us so often seem poles apart from the extremists that we see committing acts of violence and terror on the news. How is it that some say that Islam is entirely founded on peace and others seem to feel that the primary tenet of Islam is war? What I intend to do here is to have a brief look at Islam in the light of the theme ‘peace and conflict’, hopefully to help us understand Islam a little deeper and address some of the pressing questions about it that we face in our day to day lives.

Mohammed (PBUH)² is the founder of Islam; during his life he received revelations, which he came to believe were direct words from the mouth of God. He then taught from the revelations he had been given, spreading their message and teaching the way of the emerging religion ‘Islam’. Although Mohammed (PBUH) himself is merely the ‘means’ by which God’s words came to earth, the carrier of the word, as it were, his life and teachings have become very central to Islam and a key guide to how one should live out the Muslim faith. The *Sunna* are those religious actions and practices that Mohammed introduced to the Muslim way of life and the direct orders and teachings he gave. A collection of writings was later compiled about his life from those who had contact with him at the time, or those who had heard about him later through stories passed on via the oral tradition. This set of writings is known as the *Hadith*, both the *Sunna* and the *Hadith* are used as guidance by all but to varying degrees within Islam. Before looking more deeply into our two main areas within Islam, peace and conflict, it is first necessary to look at an outline of Mohammed’s (PBUH) life:³

¹ Statement and diagram belonging to Martin Accad, Arab Baptist Theological Seminary, Lebanon

² PBUH means ‘Peace Be Unto Him’, it is the traditional Muslim suffix to mentioning Muhammad’s name; as Christians we have no problem in wishing ‘peace’ to Muhammad or his followers

³ The Main Source: *As-Sira an-Nabawiyya*



Who was Muhammad?

CHILDHOOD

- Born c. 570 CE of the tribe of Quraysh in Mecca
- Father ('Abdallah) dies before his birth and mother (Amina) when he was 6 years of age
- Under custody of grandfather ('Abd al-Muttalib), and after his death under custody of his uncle (Abu Talib)

ADULTHOOD: "Meccan Period"

- Marries Khadija (age 40), a rich merchant of Mecca, at age 25
- Leads Khadija's business on caravans between Arabia and Syria
- Begins to receive "revelations" at age 40
- Receives support and encouragement of Khadija and resistance from Quraysh

PERIOD OF CRISIS: the "Hijra"

- Death of Khadija and uncle Abu Talib c. 620 CE – Loss of immunity at hostile Mecca
- Flight from Mecca to Medina on invitation, accompanied by early companions and close friend Abu Bakr year 622 – year 1 of Hijra
- Establishment of Rule in Medina with *al-Muhajirun* and rallying of several Medinan tribes – *al-Ansar*

TRANSFORMATION: "Medinan Period"

- Enmity of Jewish tribes of Medina – extermination and exile
- Economic hardships of the *Muhajirun* – result in *Mu'akhat* and *Ghazuw*: emergence of *al-jihad fi sabil Allah*
- Sets his eyes back on Mecca c. 627 and prepares for "lesser pilgrimage" (*al-'umra*)

RETURN TO MECCA: Important Paradigm

- 628 CE: Prevented from entering Mecca and "Treaty of Hudaibiyya" – *al-Hidna* (10 yrs) [see the *Sira* in Peeters, pp. 85-88]
- 630: Breach of the Treaty by Meccan allied tribes and preparation for war [Peters, pp. 89-90]
- March against Mecca with 10,000 men and surrender of Mecca without resistance after conversion of Abu Sufyan (ruler of Mecca) to Islam

YEARS OF SUCCESS

- Destruction of Pagan idols in Mecca and surroundings
- Mecca becomes centre of government – many more tribes submit to this important centre
- Death of Muhammad in 632 CE

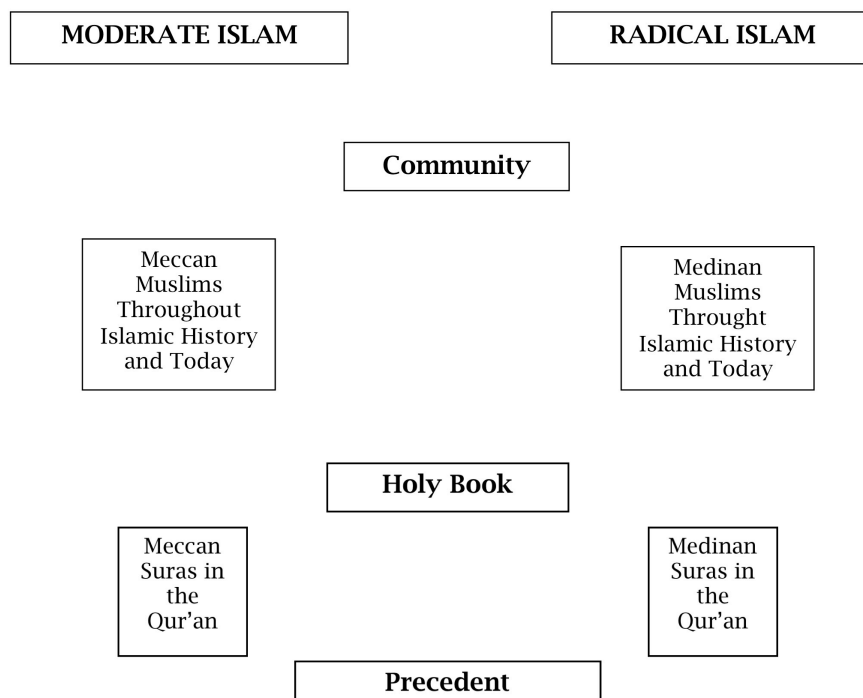
Peace and conflict within Islam?

As is evident here, Mohammed's (PBUH) life can be seen as being divided into two main eras. A helpful way to understand the seeming contradictions within Islam with regard to the issues of peace and conflict is to divide Islam into two very broad camps: the first



being that of the *Meccan* era, at which point, Mohammed (PBUH) and the Qur'an seemed to point towards peace, tolerance and almost an equality between Muslims and 'People of the Book'- ie Jews and Christians. The second camp could be referred to as those who adhere more to the teachings and lifestyle of Mohammed (PBUH) during the *Medinan* era, at which point he and the Qur'an speak more aggressively against those who reject Islam and in which we find a much more politically based ideology of expansion and war.

Using the definition of Islam that we began with as a guide, in light of its aforementioned two strands, Islam as a whole, in a very general sense, could be mapped out as follows:



There are many verses (*‘ayat*) that come from the Meccan period of Mohammed’s (PBUH) life, that point towards tolerance and peace and often have a stronger focus on one’s internal, personal spiritual growth and purification. These verses are the ones that would be emphasised and adhered to by the moderate or ‘Meccan’ Muslims. Such verses include:

Wherewith Allah guides all those who seek His good pleasure to the ways of peace and safety, and leads them out of darkness, by His Will, unto the light and guides them to a Path that is Straight. (Al-Ma’idah 5:15)

Allah calls to the Home of Peace and He guides whom He pleases to a Way that is straight. (Yunus 10:25)

People within Meccan Islam would focus on teachings in the Hadith such as:

“The best Islam is to give salam (peace) to every one, whether you know that person or not.” (al-Bukhari, Hadith no 11) ⁴

They would suggest that are three major components in the concept of peace (*salam*) in Islam. Which are:

- Inner peace and harmony in the life of every individual
- Social cohesion in the community
- Treatment of tensions and conflicts

It is interesting to compare this idea of all-rounded, all encompassing peace with the Jewish or Christian ideas of *Shalom*. All provide a virtually identical picture of how the world should be and which values it should be based upon.

‘Meccan’ Muslims would therefore interpret verses about Jihad, or ‘holy war’, in terms of the war within an individual against sin; the war to remain pure and keep on the ‘straight path’ along with the struggle for peace and justice in the community and the wider world context.

On a more open, community level, then, we are directed towards verses that seem to state that all those who do good are blessed and equal in God’s sight:

Not according to your desires, nor those of the People of the Book, whosoever works evil, will be requited accordingly. He will not find beside Allah any protector or helper. If any do deeds of righteousness, be they male or female, and have faith, they will enter heaven and not the least of injustice will be done to them. (Annisa’ 4:123-124)

Those who spend in charity whether in prosperity or in adversity, who restrain anger and pardon people - for Allah loves those who do good. (Ali Imran 3: 133-135)

“O people, be conscious of your Lord, who created you from one soul” (Annisa’ 4:1)

“O you who believe, stand out firmly for Allah, as witnesses to fair dealing and let not the hatred of others to you make you to swerve to wrong and depart from justice. Be just, that is next to piety. Be conscious of Allah, for Allah is well-acquainted with all that you do” (5:8 see also 4:135 and 6:152)

Some of the key Medinan texts give a very different picture of the expected behaviour of a Muslim and seem to make any interpretation of jihad as anything other than physical war very difficult⁵:

⁴ Some would also claim that the word ‘Islam’ comes from the word ‘Salam’ itself in Arabic which means ‘peace’, though it does come from the same root originally the word directly linked to the word ‘Islam’ denotes ‘surrendering’ or ‘offering up’ or ‘committing ones self to the cause of God’ and is actually not directly related to any of the words to do with ‘peace’

“I will cast terror into the hearts of those who disbelieve. Therefore strike off their heads and strike off every fingertip of them” (Al Anfal 8:12)

“O you who believe! Fight those of the unbelievers who are near to you and let them find in you hardness” (At-Tawba 9:123)

“The punishment of those who wage war against Allah and His messenger and strive to make mischief in the land is only this, that they should be murdered or crucified or their hands and their feet should be cut off on opposite sides or they should be imprisoned; this shall be as a disgrace for them in this world, and in the hereafter they shall have a grievous chastisement” (Al-Ma’ida 5:33)

“Will ye not fight people who violated their oaths, plotted to expel the apostle and took the aggressive by being the first to assault you? Do you fear them? May, it is God whom ye should fear more justly if you are believers! Fight them and God will punish them with your hands, cover them with shame and will give you victory over them and heal the breasts of the believers” (Ibrahim 14:13)

“Therefore when you meet the unbelievers then strike their necks even if you give them a sound thrashing (or massacre them) fetter/shackle them firmly thereafter it is time for either generosity (grace/benevolence) or ransom (redemption or sacrifice –as in he sacrificed a great deal for it) until the war lays down its burdens. Thus ye are commanded, but if it had been God’s will, he could certainly have exacted retribution on them himself but he lets you fight in order to test you one against the other. But those who are slain in the way of God- he will not let their deeds be lost.” (Annisa’ 4:47)

This, coupled with the fact that the prophet exempts weaker people, women and old people from entering into Jihad, implies that a physical battle against the unbelievers is expected.

Not equal are those believers who sit at home and receive no hurt, and those who strive and fight in the cause of God (in jihad) with their goods and their persons. God hath granted a grade higher to those who strive and fight (in jihad) with their goods and person than those who sit at home. Unto all in faith hath God promised good but those who strive and fight (in jihad) hath he distinguished above those who sit at home by a special reward. (Annisa 4:95)

Another well known ‘aya (verse) from the Qur’an is actually from the early *Medinan* era and is a distinct call for tolerance:

“Let there be no compulsion in religion: Truth stands out clear from Error: whoever rejects evil and believes in Allah hath grasped the most trustworthy hand-hold, that never breaks. And Allah heareth and knoweth all things.” (Yusifali 2:256)

⁵ There is a mention in the Qur’an and the Hadith of two types of Jihad- Jihad al-Akbar (greater Jihad) and Jihad al-Asghar (lesser Jihad), which has brought many Muslims to debate whether these parallel both ideas of Jihad as a physical battle and Jihad as a war of the mind/ spirit, and if so, which is the lesser and which the greater Jihad.

This verse, however, is referred to in the *Hadith*, where the reasons and timing of its revelation are explained in the following terms:

“Al-Suddi said that the verse was sent down concerning a man of the Helpers known as Abu al-Husayn who had two sons. One day merchants from Syria came to Medina to sell oil. The sons of Abu al-Husayn came to the merchants, who converted them to Christianity. They then went to Syria with the merchants. When Abu al-Husayn knew this, he came to the Prophet and asked: “Shall I pursue them?” God then sent down “There is no compulsion in religion.” The Messenger of God said: “May God banish them! They are the first two who rejected faith.” Mujahid said: “This was before the Messenger of God was commanded to fight against the People of the Book. God’s saying ‘There is no compulsion in religion’ was abrogated and he was commanded to fight against the People of the Book in the Sura ‘Repentance’ (9:29).”

This brings us on to the concept of abrogation, which is crucial in such studies as it can greatly change the way one reads and understands the whole of Islam. This is the notion that generally states that something *later* has the power override something *earlier*. This idea is found within the Qur’an but how it is to be understood exactly has proved to be a controversial issue, and a very important one because, as you can imagine, given the stark difference between verses in the Qur’an, it could have a great impact on how you see the Qur’an as a whole and the message it gives.

There are different views of the meaning of abrogation within Islam; some of the main ideas could be roughly mapped out as follows:

- Some ‘ayat (verses) in the Qur’an abrogate or overrule others (the later ones abrogating the earlier ones)⁶
- That the Qur’an may abrogate not only the Qur’an but also the Sunna (records of the deeds and example of Mohammed (PBUH)) and that the sunna may even abrogate the Qur’an.
- Some claim that abrogation refers only to the fact that the Qur’an as a whole abrogates previous revelations or scriptures, more specifically, the *Torah* of Musa (the Hebrew scriptures) and the *Injil* of Isa (the gospel of Jesus).
- Some Muslims, particularly modern scholars, disagree with the concept of abrogation all together.

Some of the key texts in the Qur’an that refer to abrogation are:

‘None of our revelations do we abrogate or forget, but we substitute with something better or similar: don’t you know that God is able to do anything?’⁷ (Al-Baqara 2:106)

‘When we substitute one revelation for another- and Allah knows best what he reveals (in stages⁸)- they say “thou art but a forger” but most of the understand not.’ (An-Nahl 16:101)

⁶ Although not all agree upon which verses abrogate which. This is made more complicated by the fact that the Qur’an is arranged, not chronologically, but in terms of the size of the Suras, the shorter Suras coming at the beginning and longer ones at the end.

⁷ A text which is very ambiguous even in and of itself



'Allah doth blot out or confirm what he pleaseth: with him is the mother of the book' (Al-Ra'd 13:9)

The issue of abrogation is made even more complicated, however, by the fact that the Qur'an is not arranged chronologically, but roughly by the length of the *Sura* (chapter); the shorter ones being at the beginning and the longer ones at the end. In general, however, the larger Suras towards the end tend to be the ones from the Medinan era and the shorter ones at the beginning are mostly from the earlier Meccan era, though there is some merging and integration of the two types within the Qur'an. It does tend, then, to be the *Medinan* Muslims who lean more on the concept of abrogation as it gives medinan 'ayat prominence.

Further Questions:

- What might Christianity look like from the outside? Would people carrying out a similar study about Christianity though looking at the Bible point out similar problems of contradiction? Are there not plenty of verses in the Bible equally as violent and that seem to advocate war against the 'enemies of God and God's people'?
- How would you respond to someone, particularly a Muslim, who has questions like this about Christianity and the Bible?
- Do we use the rather convenient idea of abrogation when it suits us to claim that the New Testament 'blots out' the Hebrew Scriptures? If so, where in the Bible does God prescribe or permit such a notion?

Interesting thought:

It is perhaps worth thinking about how the key elements of Christianity and Islam. Where it may be tempting to parallel Jesus with Mohammed (PBUH) this would in actual fact be a misunderstanding. Jesus himself is to Christians what the *Qur'an* is to Muslims, the direct, literal word of God. Jesus *as a person* is the final word; the ultimate revelation of God. Bearing this in mind, it is interesting to take the parallel further and suggest that the Bible, then, is more similar perhaps to the Hadith and the Sunna, and, taking the idea on further, Mohammed (PBUH) is most equivalent to Mary.

SIKHISM

What is Sikhism?

Sikhism has been described as a religion of militaristic warriors, or soldier-saints fighting injustice. In 1947 British rule in India ended and India became independent. It was also the year that saw the partition of the Punjab between India and Pakistan. The following decades have been rife with religious conflict, as Sikhs, Hindus and Muslims have become embroiled in an on-going struggle over land, power, independence and political and religious freedom. In 1966 a reduced Sikh-dominated Punjab was separated from the Hindu-majority state of Haryana. But by the 1980's Sikh activists and Indian security forces were in constant conflict, as the activists called for the creation of an independent Sikh country, *Khalistan*. In 1984 many of these activists were occupying the Golden Temple in *Amritsar*, and Indira Gandhi's decision to order the Indian Army to storm the Temple led to

⁸ (in stages) is only added in the English translation of the text



bloodshed, and her eventual assassination by her Sikh bodyguards, which in turn fuelled more violence. These events, combined with the existence of growing Sikh diasporas, have resulted in a lack of concrete support for the separatist movement. Sikhism tends to make headlines today over matters such as the right for schoolchildren to wear their turban to school or the right for any Sikh to wear their *kirpan* (sword). But in an age of terrorism and sporadic civil wars powered by religious extremism, important questions are raised about the ethics of warfare within, and in the name of religion.

Through looking at the history of Sikhism it can be seen that violence as a reaction to oppression is quite prevalent, and this has had the unfortunate side effect of overwhelming the attempts made by the Sikh Gurus to form a society based upon equality and service, where people regardless of gender, or religion, or social status can live in peace.

Guru Gobind Singh was the 10th and last of the Sikh human Gurus or teachers. For Sikhs the 10 Gurus are important spiritual figures as they are seen as spiritual guides who gave God's teachings to humans. One of *Guru Gobind Singh's* legacies was the formation of the *Khalsa*, or brotherhood, to which Sikhs today can still be initiated, and at which they all drink **amrit** (a nectar formed from mixing sugar with water) from the same bowl (symbolising their equality), are given the same name, '*Singh*' for men and '*Kaur*' for women (symbolising that they are all members of the same faith family) and promise to keep certain duties including the wearing of the 5 *K's*. The story of the forming of the *Khalsa* can seem unnecessarily violent unless it is looked at in context.

Who are the eleven Gurus?

1. *Guru Nanak (1469-1539) – the centrality of equality*

The first Guru was *Guru Nanak*, born to Hindu parents in the Punjab in 1469 CE. He worked as an accountant in a government office alongside many Muslims, and is noted as enjoying talking to them about their beliefs. One morning, when he was about 30 years old, he disappeared while bathing in the river. It was assumed he had drowned but three days later he reappeared declaring that there was no longer any such thing as Hindu or Muslim. He claimed to have encountered God who had told him that following a religion or religious practices such as fasting and pilgrimages did not make a person truly religious. Rather it was the way they lived and what they believed which mattered. He travelled to many holy Hindu and Muslim places teaching this message, eventually settling in Kartapur in northern India. The people who came to learn from him called themselves Sikhs, which comes from the Punjabi for 'disciple'. They meditated together, sang together and, most importantly ate together, defying one of the rules of hereditary caste, followed by Hindus. This illustrates the importance of equality. *Guru Nanak* also taught that God was in women just as much as God was in men. In fact God is never referred to as 'he' or 'she' as *Guru Nanak* taught that "God is neither a woman nor a man", and that it is wrong to treat women as if they were not as good as men. He levied this criticism at both Hinduism and Islam. Women who wish to become full members of the community go through the same ceremony as men, taking on the name '*Kaur*', which means princess. Upon marriage they often keep this name rather than taking on their husband's surname. In the *Gurdwara* (place of worship) they lead services alongside the men.



2. *Guru Angad (1504-1552) – the formation of a religion*

Before dying Guru Nanak appointed one of his followers the next Guru and renamed him Angad, which means 'part of me'. This tradition of a Guru choosing the next Guru remained, and Sikhs believe that each Guru shared Guru Nanak's spirit, rather like a series of candles that have been lit from each other. There is a story that Guru Nanak choose Angad to be the next teacher rather than either of his two sons because they refused to fetch a cup from a muddy ditch, saying it was a servant's job to get dirty. Angad jumped into the ditch and fetched it without being asked, thus showing his servanthood. Guru Angad is mostly known for writing down the hymns written by himself and Guru Nanak, which form the basis of the Sikh scriptures. He began to systematise the religion through building places for worship (gurdwaras) and providing education.

3. *Guru Amar Das (1479-1574) – the langar as a symbol of equality*

Before his death Guru Angad chose a distant relative to be the next Guru. Guru Amar Das continued teaching the importance of equality through insisting that everyone should sit together and eat the same meal. One story describes how the Emperor came to visit him and the Guru insisted that he join everyone else on the floor to eat. This teaching is seen today in the *langar* or community meal after a service in the gurdwara. Directly following a service everyone has some *karah parshad* which is sweet dough made from flour, sugar and ghee (purified butter). It is prepared and stirred with a *kirpan* during the *Ardas* (final prayers) and served to everyone as they leave and make their way to the kitchen and dining room for the langar, to which everyone is welcome. The meal is vegetarian so that non-meat eaters can take part, and is free. It is cooked and served by both men and women, and is paid for by donations. It is expected that all members of the Sikh community will take part in the cooking and serving of food as an act of service (*sewa*).

4. *Guru Ram Das (1534-1581) – the building of Amritsar*

Guru Amar Das appointed his son-in-law Ram Das to follow him as the next Guru. He continued to write hymns, some of which are read and sung at Sikh weddings today, and he started to build the town of Ramdaspur, which later became known as the city of *Amritsar* (pool of nectar) in the Punjab. He was a social reformer who denounced the veiling of women and the practice of sati (when a woman immolated herself by jumping onto her husband's burning funeral pyre). He also advocated for widow remarriage should it be the wish of the woman. Despite these teachings, some scholars have pointed out that Sikhism itself remained a religion dominated by men, which encouraged the development of qualities most often associated with masculinity. In more recent times women's voices are starting to be articulated, particularly in the diaspora.

5. *Guru Arjan (1563-1606) – the stirrings of conflict*

Guru Arjan was the son of Guru Ram Das and was hence the first Guru to be born a Sikh. He continued the building at Amritsar, including the Golden Temple, a gurdwara built in the middle of an artificial lake. He also continued Guru Angad's work and collected and put together the Sikh hymns into one holy book, the *Adi Granth*, which still exists today, and placed it in the Golden Temple. Until now the Sikh Gurus and their followers had enjoyed good relations with the rulers of India, and in fact Akbar, the Mughal Emperor of India was said to be very impressed by Guru Arjan's work in creating the *Adi Granth*. But in 1605CE Akbar died and the new Emperor Jehangir arrested Guru Arjan, accusing him of supporting a rival contender to his throne. He was tortured to death in 1606.



6. *Guru Har Gobind (1595-1644) – the formation of an army*

Guru Har Gobind became Guru after his father's death and responded to the changing times by creating an army. He believed that Sikhs had to be able and prepared to defend themselves with force if necessary. He lived as a soldier and worked hard to train his followers to become skilled and brave soldiers. He wore two swords, one of which represented spiritual power (*piri*) and the other representing temporal power (*miri*). These swords can be seen in one of the main Sikh symbols, the *khanda*, which is found on the yellow flag (*nishan sahib*) that flies over every gurdwara. The *khanda* is formed of an upright double-edged sword circled by a *chakra* (symbolising the oneness of God, and the unity of humanity), and encircled by two single edged swords (kirpans) that represent Guru Har Gobind's swords, symbolising the balancing of military skill and spirituality. According to one rather notable story in Sikh tradition, Guru Har Gobind was arrested and imprisoned with 52 Hindu princes. After several years he was to be released but he refused to go unless the princes were released also. The emperor agreed to release as many princes as could walk out holding onto the Guru's garment and hands. So the Guru had a special cloak made with many strips of cloth, enabling all the princes to hold onto a piece, and thus go free.

7. *Guru Har Rai (1630-1661) – the peacemaker*

At the time of Guru Har Rai (Har Gobind's grandson) the Emperor was Aurangzeb. He took offence at the *Adi Granth*, feeling that it was offensive to Islam. Guru Har Rai spent his time defending the holy book's integrity and trying to keep the peace between Islam and Sikhism.

8. *Guru Har Krishan (1656-1664) – the example of sewa*

Guru Har Krishan was Har Rai's son and he was five years old when he became Guru. He died at the age of eight through contracting smallpox as a result of caring for smallpox sufferers. He is remembered as an example of compassion and *sewa* or service. *Sewa* is an essential part of life as a Sikh. Members of the *Panth* or Sikh community believe that God is worshipped through service to others, no matter who they are. Many give a tenth of their income as an offering to help others, and most Sikhs give of their time too, whether that be serving at the *langar* or caring for the ill in the wider community.

9. *Guru Tegh Bahadur (1621-1675) – martyrdom*

Guru Tegh Bahadur was the son of the 6th Guru, Har Gobind. Emperor Aurangzeb's distaste for and suspicion of Sikhism and Hinduism had developed into persecution. He was killing Sikhs and Hindus who were refusing to give up their religion and convert to Islam. Believing that he was a holy man, some Hindu leaders approached the Guru and asked for his help and advice. He encouraged both them and his fellow Sikhs to keep their faith and not convert. He believed that everyone should be free to worship in whatever way they chose. Like Guru Nanak he taught that it was through knowing God that one became religious, not through adherence to a particular religious tradition. He was arrested and taken to Delhi. Refusing to accept any of the Aurangzeb's bribes he was made to watch as three of his followers were tortured to death. He stood firm and insisted that everyone should worship in the way they wanted, and was beheaded. Sikhs see him as a martyr who died not only for the Sikh faith but for the Hindu faith as well. He died so that Hindus, as well as Sikhs, could have religious freedom.

10. Guru Gobind Singh (1666-1708) – the formation of the Khalsa

It is in light of this history that Guru Gobind Singh's actions must be viewed. He was nine years old when his father was killed and he became the 10th Guru. Sikhs continued to be persecuted for their beliefs and the rulers were still practising Islamisation. Guru Gobind Singh believed that Sikhs needed to be able to fight for their survival and should be prepared to die for their beliefs. In 1699 he formed the Khalsa, who took vows of loyalty that included a readiness to take up arms for righteous causes. Many Sikhs today believe that violence is wrong but sometimes it is the only way to fight injustice, if all peaceful ways have failed. At the Khalsa initiation ceremony, men drank amrit from the same bowl. At the original ceremony it had been prepared by the Guru's wife and their drinking it symbolised their rejection of hereditary caste divisions and acceptance of equality. They were given the name 'Singh' (lion) and promised to uphold the 5 K's : uncut hair (Kesh), carrying of a comb (Kangha) and sword (Kirpan), the wearing of a bracelet (Kara) and short pants (Kachera). At initiation ceremonies today women also drink the amrit and take on the name 'Kaur'. Not all Sikhs choose to become members of the Khalsa, feeling that they cannot keep the rules expected of them, or that it just isn't important to them.

11. Guru Granth Sahib – the final Guru

The other significant legacy of Guru Gobind Singh was his declaration that there were to be no more human Gurus after him. Instead he determined that the last Guru would be the holy book now known as the Guru Granth Sahib. It contains hymns written by Guru Nanak and the other Gurus and some written by Hindu and Muslim holy men, as well as advice on how to live. Since its declaration as the last Guru nothing has been added to it or taken away from it. It is used in all Sikh worship and has the most important place in the gurdwara. Once opened it is never left unattended and there is always someone sitting behind it. At night it is wrapped in cloths and put away, often in its own room. It is treated with great respect and is carried above the head as it is the word of God. It is not to be interpreted, or even translated into another language as this is an interpretation in itself. Any Sikh, male or female, can carry out ceremonies in the gurdwara so long as they are considered competent.

A history full of conflict

After Guru Gobind Singh's death and for the next century sections of the Sikh Panth continued to fight for their faith, and as an act of rebellion against the declining Mughal Empire. Persecution worsened, and many kept their faith a secret in order not to be killed. But in 1799, Lahore fell to an army led by nineteen-year-old Rangit Singh. He became Maharaja and ruled the Punjab in relative peace for the next fifty years, until his death in 1849 when the British annexed the territory. He is remembered as a tolerant ruler who employed Muslims and Hindus in important positions and had good relations with the West. He is also remembered as somewhat slack in his adherence to his religion, having several wives, some of which were Hindu and committed sati when he died. In many ways he exemplifies the shift in leadership within Sikhism from religious to political. During his reign many gurdwaras fell into the hands of Hindus and the religion itself seemed to go into a decline. The stage was being set for a religious revival.

The later half of the nineteenth century saw various reform movements flourish. Most were concerned with purifying the Sikh religion and making it distinct from Hinduism again. The most significant of these movements could be argued to be the *Singh Sabha* movement



(Sabha means associations) that came into existence in 1873, as a response to the conversions of wealthy, educated, high-caste Sikhs to Christianity, and the threat of Hindu reform movements. Interestingly the British administration in India strongly supported the associations, and the establishment of Sikh schools and colleges. Sikh loyalty was advantageous to the British as they made up the majority of the British army in India. In 1909 the Anand Marriage Act was passed allowing Sikhs to have Sikh rather than Hindu weddings and in 1925, the Gurdwaras Act gave them back control of gurdwaras in the Punjab.

It is understandable therefore that Sikhs would be so disappointed that when the British left they divided the Punjab between Pakistan and India, in effect giving half to Muslims and half to Hindus. Rioting broke out, thousands of people were killed and, depending upon the historian, Sikhs chose or were forced to leave Pakistan. Nehru seemed to offer Sikhs virtual autonomy in northern India, but he deferred granting Sikh demands for a Punjab state. His daughter and successor as Prime Minister, Indira Gandhi granted it, but then, feeling threatened by the demands of separatists she started to defend the national unity of India by increasing the powers of the central government, leading to yet more opposition from the Punjab and eventually to the assault upon the Golden Temple in Amritsar, and her assassination.

The desire for an independent country in the Punjab region (Khalistan) seems to have abated among many Sikhs especially those of the diaspora, but their ties to the Punjab remain strong. As diaspora Sikhs number approximately one million of the world's fifteen million Sikhs, it can be assumed that their redefinition of their religion in an ever-changing world will have a huge impact on future manifestations of Sikhism.

Further reading:

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