

Text provided for Faith Communities Council of Victoria

A guide to some of the many faiths in the Victorian community.

Note: A booklet of this sort was first prepared by members of the Jewish, Christian and Muslim communities. In order to maintain some consistency and comparability between the widely different religions, the same list and sequence of topics were used in asking members of other faith communities to outline elements of their own tradition.

JUDAISM, CHRISTIANITY and ISLAM¹

ORIGINS

What does the name mean?

J Israel (Yisra'el) is the name for the Jewish people. It means 'one who struggles with God' – life is a continual struggle to know what God wants us to do, to achieve our potential and to make the world better for all people.

C Christian is a kind of nickname which means 'follower of the Christ' (the Greek word for messiah or the anointed one).

I 'Islam' means "willing submission" to God's will. It comes from the Arabic root s-l-m, from which the word salaam or "peace" is also derived (The Hebrew word for peace, Shalom, has the same root).

To where do we trace our faith back?

J Abraham realised there was only One God (about 4000 years ago). Revelation of Torah at Mount Sinai (about 3500 years ago). Core values come from these two events. Practices developed over centuries, and continue to adapt and adjust to this day.

C Christianity is based on the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. Abraham is considered a forefather to Christians – in a faith sense.

I Muhammad, the final Prophet of Islam is considered the Seal of a line of Prophets including Jesus and tracing back to Abraham, who is revered as the father of the three monotheistic religions. It is usual when mentioning Muhammad or any prophets to say 'Peace be upon him' but for space and simplicity it has been omitted in this booklet.

Key people

J Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, Sarah, Rebekka, Rachel and Lea, Moses (descended from Abraham's son Isaac), Rabbis of 2000 years ago. Maimonides, 800 years ago.

C Jesus, Mary (the mother of Jesus), the 12 Apostles (the followers of Jesus), St Paul, and the early Saints.

I The Prophet Muhammad and his Companions, such as Abu Bakr, Ali and Aisha, Abraham, Jesus, Mary, and the other prophets. The founders of the 4 schools is Islamic law.

Key Book(s) and Texts

¹ The text of the Jewish, Christian and Muslim faith guide is used with the permission of the Jewish Christian Muslim Association of Australia.

J Hebrew Bible (Torah), The Talmud (about 1500 years ago), Misneh Torah (800 years ago). The Shulkhan Arukh (450) years ago.

C The Hebrew bible with the addition of the Gospels ('good news') of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John and the letters of the apostles sent to the traditions of Christianity they established.

I The Qur'an and its many interpretations and commentaries, The Hadish (teachings and sayings of the prophet Muhammad of which there are various collections). The numerous scholarly works which analyse and derive principles from these.

Prophets

J Moses, Samuel, Elijah, Elisha, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Hosea, Joel, Amos, Micah, Babakuk, Zephania, Haggai, Zachaharia, Malakhi.

C All of the Jewish prophets and John the Baptist are recognised as fore-runners to the Christian faith, and tend to be treated equally.

I Muhammad, Jesus, the prophets of the Hebrew bible, and many thousands of other unnamed prophets, are all given the same respect.

Final prophets?

J Malakhi (about 2400 years ago) is believed by Jews to be the final prophet.

C All the Jewish prophets are valued, but Jesus is considered the fulfilment of the prophetic tradition.

I Muhammad is in a line of prophets since Adam and is believed by Muslims to be the final messenger.

After the final prophets?

J Anyone after Malakhi is not considered by Judaism to be a prophet (so Jesus and Muhammad are not considered as prophets), though there is little doubt that they existed as gifted and charismatic teachers and leaders. Since Malakhi, 'God's will' has been determined through Torah interpretation and commentary.

C The Council of Nicea over 1500 years ago fixed the Christian scriptures: anyone after this is not recognised, so Muhammad and Baha'ullah (Bahai faith) may be considered as great teachers but not prophets.

I Anyone after Muhammad is not considered a prophet, so for example Maha'ullah (Bahai faith) is considered a teacher but not a prophet.

About Jesus

J Jesus is not part of Jewish belief. It is probable that he existed and was a Jewish teacher, clearly very knowledgeable about his traditions. Much of what he teaches (such as Love your neighbour as yourself) comes from Jewish tradition.

C Christians teach that there is only one God, but that there is also a 'threeness' in this unity which they call 'Trinity': Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Jesus is 'God the Son' and is both fully divine and fully human.

I Muslims revere Jesus to be a prophet of God who was born miraculously from the Virgin Mary. A chapter of the Qur'an is named "Mary". However Muslims don't believe he is God and/or the Son of God. Muslims do believe in the second coming of Jesus.

Holy land(s)/places

J Israel (where the ancestors of the Jewish people lived from 4000 years ago and where Judaism developed), and especially Jerusalem (which was the capital from 3000 years ago and where the Temple was built).

C Jerusalem, and other pilgrimage sites where significant Christians have lived or worked. For example Rome, where many Christians were martyred in the Coliseum, or Isanbul.

I Mecca (in modern-day Saudi Arabia), Medina (also in Saudi Arabia), Jerusalem (in Israel/Palestine).

Pilgrimage

J When the temple was standing (until almost 2000 years ago), Jews would take offerings to Jerusalem three times a year. It is no longer obligated, but it is very special to visit Israel, and as the journey is today relatively quick and easy, some Jews go every year or so.

C Pilgrimage sties can be to either significant Churches or significant places where Jesus, or the Saints, have walked or lived (eg Via Dolorosa in Jerusalem, or Lourdes in France).

I The fifth pillar of Islam is for all able-bodies Muslims to try to make the pilgrimage to the Ka'ba (a shrine to the One God believed to have been built by Abraham and Ishmael) in the holy city of Mecca, at least once in their lifetime.

Men and women all wear simple white clothes, so as not to differentiate between rich and poor. Over 2 million people attend annually.

Legal system

J Called 'halakha' (the way), an all encompassing set of principles, rules and guidelines for living.

Less orthodox may concentrate more on ethical (behaviour) than ritual laws.

More orthodox follow laws for every aspect of life. (The modern State of Israel uses a sophisticated legal structure which has aspects of Jewish, Turkish and British law).

C Some traditions of Christianity are governed by official codes of Canon Law but generally Christian behaviour is regulated by theological and philosophical considerations, including the 10 commandments given to Moses and interpreted by Jesus.

J Called 'Sharia' (the way) referring to an all-encompassing set of principles, rules and guidelines for living. These cover ritual worship as well as eating, marriage, and commerce. The objective is to help every aspect of life become an act of worship.

CURRENT DATA

How many in Australia (approx)

- J 100,000 Jews live in Australia
- C 15 million Christians in Australia (according to Census figures)
- I Australia has 300,000 Muslims

How many Worldwide

- J There are 20 million Jews across the world.
- C There are 2.3 billion Christians
- I The Muslim world population is 1.3 billion

BELIEFS

Revelation?

J Less orthodox: Humans were inspired by God to write their story of 'How does God want us to live?' This is the Torah (the 'Five Books of Moses', Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy).

More orthodox: God dictated the Torah to Moses on top of Mount Sinai. The text is said to be unchanged.

C Christians say that Jesus is 'the Word of God' made flesh, and that God is revealed in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus, such that Jesus is the 'image of the unseen God'. Christians also recognise God's revelation to the Jewish people through their prophets.

I Muslims believe the Qur'an to be the exact words revealed by God through the angel Gabriel to Muhammad.

There are 114 chapters and over 6000 verses, which many Muslims have committed to memory. The text is unchanged and in its original form as revealed 1400 years ago.

Day of Judgement?

J Yes (in some sense). God will ask ‘Why did we not live up to our potential? All are accountable. All will be judged for their actions in this world and either rewarded or punished. It is a central Jewish belief that God is merciful and compassionate, but also just.

C Yes. Because God is just, Jesus envisaged a day when good and evil in the world would come under God’s judgement. But this judgement is prefigured in the death of Jesus himself, which is also a source of God’s forgiveness – a key Christian teaching.

I Yes. All shall be judged for their actions and intentions in this world and either rewarded or punished according to their piety. All will be accountable to God on the Day of Judgement. It is a central Muslim belief that God is merciful and compassionate, but also just.

Life after death

J Less orthodox: Perhaps the soul lives on, but not physical resurrection.
More orthodox: Yes, assumed for the soul, until the Messiah comes (see Messiah), when many think that the bodies of the dead will be brought back to life. However the matter is open to speculation.

C Christians believe that the resurrection of Jesus has destroyed the power of death. Christians enjoy eternal life as a gift from God here and now – and after death they look forward to the resurrection of the dead and life forever in the presence of God.

I Yes – for eternity. The hereafter is an infinite existence whereas this world is finite and temporary.

Heaven

J Less orthodox: Perhaps – we will find out!
More orthodox: Yes

C Christians believe that in Christ and through the gift of God’s Spirit, they meet and live with God here and now. Nevertheless, they also look forward to the time when they will enter fully into the presence of God and see God ‘face to face’. This is what Christians mean when they speak of ‘heaven’.

I Yes. Imagery in the Qur’an is of eternal gardens, streams, and shade, but Muslims are reminded not to take this literally but as an indication of a reality we cannot yet comprehend. We believe that only God decides who will enter heaven.

Hell

J Perhaps – or perhaps just nothing – not a very fully developed idea. The Jewish emphasis is on living this life in the best way we can.

C Just as ‘heaven’ is being in the presence of God, so ‘hell’ is being cut off from God’s presence. It is possible that people experience this even in this life.

I Yes. The imagery is of a fire and suffering, but we are taught to take this as only an indication of a reality we cannot yet comprehend.

Messiah

J All Jews: No Messiah has yet come to the world.
Less Orthodox: May not accept the idea of the messiah as an individual.
More orthodox: Yes, God will send the Messiah, descended from King David, announced by Elijah the prophet, to bring about the Messianic Times. (note: some people call themselves Messianic Jews – they accept Jesus was the Messiah. They therefore cannot be considered as Jews).

C Yes. Jesus of Galilee (which is Northern Israel) is called ‘the Christ’ which means ‘anointed’ – after the Jewish custom to anoint Kings and priests. Christians believe that Jesus was ‘anointed’ in both senses – that he was the Messiah who will return to bring the reign of God and the fullness of life to all believers.

I Yes Jesus is referred to as the Messiah in the Qur’an. Muslims believe that when he returns, he will invite all humanity to his original message, which is the core message of Islam.

Messianic Time

J Less orthodox Reject bodily resurrection. Our task is to move the world, bit by bit towards a time of perfection (human progress)

More orthodox: Yes, believe in physical resurrection of the body in the ‘Time of Eternal Perfection’.

C Jesus announced the coming of the ‘kingdom’ or the reign of God. It is present now in the world, as a seed which is growing, and will be fully revealed in the final judgement and resurrection.

I Unknown. However many Muslims believe we are (relatively) close to the end of the world.

All-Powerful God?

J Less orthodox: Maybe not – perhaps God has chosen not to be ‘all powerful’. Otherwise all tragedies must be ‘God’s fault’. Instead, humans and God work in partnership.

More orthodox: Yes, God is omnipotent (all powerful).

J Some Christians believe in an all-powerful God and one who intervenes by actions. Others, while confessing that God is constant in love and care, do not believe in specific interventions.

I Muslims believe in a God with certain attributes including ultimate power over all that happens and God's ultimate will that determines everything, without denying humans free will.

One All-knowing God?

J Yes. God is everywhere and is aware of all things.

C Yes. God is everywhere and is aware of all things

I Yes. God knows all things, everywhere and at all times.

Do you have to believe in God?

J No. A Jew is a Jew if born as a Jew or converted to Judaism. Judaism is a people and culture as well as a religion. A 'religious' Jew believes in God.

C Yes, Christians believe and trust in God as revealed by Jesus. The whole Christian life is defined by this faith.

I Yes. Faith in God is the first and fundamental aspect of being a Muslim.

COMMUNICATING WITH GOD

Most Common Names for God

J YHVH (when we see this most holy name written in Hebrew we say 'Adonai', though some reserve 'Adonai' only for prayer and say Adoshem or Hashem (the name) instead when not praying. El (same root as Allah), Elohim, HaMakom (the Place), Tzur HaOlamim (Rock of the Universe), Rakhamim (Compassionate One) and many others.

C Christians call their One God: The Lord (from Hebrew Adonai and Greek Kyrios). They name the One Triune: 'The Father, and the Son and the Holy Spirit'. There are some churches today which also use non gender specific names for God.

I 'Allah' means "the God" in Arabic. (Millions of Arab and some Indonesian Christians also use the word "Allah" to denote God). There are 99 'Beautiful Names' describing aspects of God, such as "the All-Merciful" and "the All-Compassionate". Allah has the same root as El (Jewish).

Prayer

- J All religious Jews: regular blessings
Less orthodox: Prayer services weekly or less
More orthodox: 3 times/day, evening, morning and afternoon.
- C Christians are encouraged to pray unceasingly (St Paul) but morning and night are the usual favourites.
- I At least five times a day – dawn, midday, afternoon, sunset, and night.
Muslims are also encouraged to practise “Remembrance of God” unceasingly.

Where?

- J Jews can pray anywhere suitable, i.e. at home, at work, but it is preferable with the community (with 10 people if possible).
- C Christians can pray anywhere, i.e. at church, at home, at work. Jesus promised that he would be wherever ‘two or three are gathered in his name’ – but Christians believe that the presence of God is also with us when we are on our own.
- I Muslims can pray anywhere clean, i.e. at home, at work, or in a mosque.
Muslims are encouraged to pray together when possible.

Language of Prayer

- J Less orthodox: Hebrew, a bit of Aramaic (the language of Israel at the time of the Rabbis, 2000 years ago) and the vernacular (language of the country, eg. English).
More orthodox: Hebrew, a bit of Aramaic.
- C Some traditions of Christianity use ancient languages such as Greek.
More commonly today the common language of the individual or community is used.
- I Arabic. Arabic is a Semitic language closely related to Hebrew and Aramaic. The Qur’an has been preserved in its original Arabic to prevent the dilution of its meaning through translation. Muslims can also say personal prayers in their own language.

Singing and Music

- J All use singing and chanting as well as reading in services. A ‘*khazzan*’ sometimes leads the service.
Less orthodox may have a female ‘*khazzan*’, a mixed choir, and use musical instruments such as an organ.
More orthodox do not use instruments on Sabbaths and festivals, and the most orthodox believe women’s voices should not be heard by men.

C Singing and music are important in Christian worship and many worship services will be completely sung or chanted.

I Muslims are encouraged to read the Qur'an "beautifully" and those who can recite it and the Call the Prayer melodiously are accorded high respect. Musical instruments are accepted by most Muslims, although by some only in a limited form. Different cultures around the world have their own forms of music.

Prayer direction

J Jerusalem (facing north-west from Australia, east from Europe.)

C Traditionally oriented toward the east (the rising sun as symbol of the resurrection) but commonly today no particular orientation.

I Mecca (facing north-west from Australia, south-east from Europe.)

Prayer clothing

J The Torah instructs us to put fringes on our clothes.
Less orthodox: Men wear a '*tallit*' (prayer shawl with fringes) during daytime services and generally cover heads in formal services. Women can also do so.

More orthodox: Men (only) wear a vest with fringes and a head covering (*yarmulke* or *kippah*) at all times, and a '*tallit*' during daytime services.

C None, except the priest who may have a plain or more ornate gown. In some traditions, different colours are worn at different seasons. It is traditional for males to uncover the head on entering a church, and some traditions expect a woman to cover her head when entering a church.

I Normal everyday clothing that is non-revealing. Females cover all parts of their body except their face and hands. Males will wear long trousers and will often wear some kind of head covering when entering the mosque. It is important that any clothing should be clean.

CALENDAR

Day starts

J Nightfall – so Shabbat (the Sabbath) starts on Friday evening and finishes on Saturday evening, and all festivals start in the evening.

C The Liturgical day begins at nightfall the day before e.g. Christmas Eve and the Easter Vigil are the start of the next day's festival.

I Sunset – so festivals start from the evening.

Calendar type

J Luni-solar. Every Hebrew month starts at the new moon, but 12 lunar months are slightly shorter than a solar year. Therefore a leap-MONTH is added every two or three years to keep the festivals in time with the solar cycle – so Passover for example is always in the springtime (of the northern hemisphere where the land of Israel is located, where Judaism developed).

C Solar, with Lunar impact. Some festivals always fall in the same season of the year (e.g. Christmas is midwinter in the Northern hemisphere but midsummer in the Southern) – but even here the Eastern Orthodox Churches continue to follow the Julian Calendar so their Christmas is 13 days later. Other festivals are also dependent on the Lunar cycles e.g. the date for Easter is determined by the lunar cycle. Other festivals are also dependent on the lunar cycle.

I Lunar. Every month starts at the new moon. There are 12 lunar months, and the year is around 10 days shorter than a solar year. Therefore, the festivals move earlier each solar year. Every 30 years (about 1 generation) a Muslim living in one place will have fasted Ramadan in all four seasons, including winter (when the fast is short) and summer (when it is long).

Main Festivals/Holy Days of the year

Judaism

Rosh Hashanah (New Year). The Shofar (Ram's horn) is blown. It reminds us of when Abraham sacrificed a ram in place of his son Isaac (the Muslim version says his other son Ishma'el). The sound is a call to the heart of repent.

Yom Kippur (Day of Atonement) – a 25 hour fast with services all day, to review our lives and improve ourselves.

Sukkot: A week-long harvest festival, also marking the 40 years that the Israelites wandered in the Sinai desert.

Simkhat Torah: Rejoicing in completing the annual reading from the Torah and starting it from the beginning again.

Hanukah: A more minor 8 day festival marking the re-dedication of the Temple in Jerusalem around 2300 years ago, and Jewish survival.

Tu Bishvat (15th day of month of Sh'vat): Also more minor – New Year for Trees. Today it is taking on a renewed importance as the festival of the environment for some Jews.

Purim: Another more minor festival where we read the Scroll of Esther and celebrate the foiling of a plan to massacre the Jews of Persia (Iran).

Pesakh (Passover): A week-long harvest festival, also celebrating the Israelite exodus from Egyptian slavery (perhaps 3300 years ago). Unleavened bread (Matzah) is eaten.

Yom HaShoah (Holocaust Day): Quite a recent introduction to remember the Holocaust where about 6,000,000 Jews were killed in Europe in the 1940s.

Yom HaAtzma'ut (Independence Day): Also a relatively recent festival which celebrates the re-establishment of a Jewish state, Israel, after 1900 years, in 1948.

Shavu'ot (Weeks): Comes 7 weeks after Pesakh (Passover) starts. It is a harvest festival which also celebrates the giving of the Torah.

Tisha "Av (the 9th day of the month of Av): We mark all the tragedies that have happened to the Jewish people over the centuries.

Christian

Not all Christian traditions formally observe a 'Christian calendar' but the main festivals are observed by all. The Christian year begins with **Advent** (4 Sundays leading up to Christmas). Christmas covers a 12 day period which is followed by **Epiphany** (when Jesus appeared to the gentiles).

The Epiphany season lasts until **Ash Wednesday** which commences the season of **Lent** (40 days to Holy Week) and that week includes the important days of **Palm Sunday, Monday, Thursday, Good Friday, Easter Eve and Easter Day**. In the Orthodox Tradition, a 50-day preparation is observed.

the Easter season lasts 50 days until Pentecost (Ascension Day), where Jesus returned to heaven, is 40 days after Easter Sunday) 10 days after Ascension, Pentecost Sunday is celebrated, followed by a 'non-festival' period lasting until the Feast of Christ the King where the liturgical year begins again.

During the year other special feasts including **Trinity Sunday** (Sunday after Pentecost), Saints Days (e.g. St Mark, St Paul, St John): days noting the Virgin Mary, and events that highlight the life of Jesus (i.e.: the transfiguration).

Other feasts include **All Saints** (which remembers all Christians now in Heaven): all Hallows (which remembers all dead people – the popular American feast of Halloween); and **St Michael and All Angels**, a feast celebrating the role of angels in our lives.

Muslim

During the entire month of **Ramadan**, Muslims should abstain from dawn to dusk, from food, drink and marital contact – for self purification. It is also a time to purify thoughts and to focus on being kind to others and for spiritual reflection,

so Muslims should try especially hard not to commit any bad deeds such as lying, backbiting or cheating.

Eid ul-Fitr: the festival of the return to *fitra* (our original, sinless state). A four day festival at the end of the holy fasting month of Ramadan.

Eid ul-Adha: the festival of the sacrifice. A four day festival commemorating the sacrifice that Abraham was commanded to make of his son Ishmael as a test of his and Ishmael's faith. God substituted a ram when Abraham passed the test and Muslims now slaughter a sheep or cow following Abraham's tradition, and give the meat to the poor and needy.

There are some lesser festivals which not all Muslims observe, such as the **Birthdays of the Prophet**. One tradition is that only festivals which existed at the time of Muhammad should be celebrated.

Community Centre

J Synagogue (a Greek word. In Hebrew there are three terms for the three main uses – house of assembly, house of prayer and house of study).

C The Church Building – remembering that 'church' also means the people who gather together in the building (the community).

I Mosque (Arabic Masjid – place of prostration). Essentially a prayer hall for collective prayers, and a focal point for the community.

In the Community Centre

J An 'Ark' (holy cupboard) containing the Torah scrolls, in the wall which faces Jerusalem, a '*Ner Tamid*' (everlasting light) which reminds us of God's continual presence, prayer and other books (Jews are called 'The People of the Book'), a law platform (*bimah*) from which the service is led.

C There are differences between the different Christian traditions. Most will have a place for people to sit or stand and a place at the front for the clergy (sanctuary). In the sanctuary there will be a table (altar) and a place for reading the Scriptures and preaching (lectern or pulpit). There will also be a bowl or pool of water (font) for baptism in the church.

I In the mosque there is a *mihrab* or prayer niche, which points towards Mecca and from which the service is led. On Fridays, a sermon is delivered from a *minbar* (similar to a pulpit). No pews – often lines marking the floor indicating where people should stand and sit.

School

J Jewish: Education is highly valued and children should be taught to swim (for safety) and educated about their faith and the world. Most synagogues have a Sunday School, but many Jewish communities also have one or more Jewish Day

Schools. Melbourne has seven. Most also teach about other faiths and beliefs. An institution for adult Jewish study is called a 'Yeshiva'.

C Christian: Christians have a long tradition of involvement in education. The home is the primary place for learning the faith, but many churches offer primary and secondary schooling. Most churches have 'Sunday Schools' or programs for teaching the faith to children, conducted before, during or after the regular worship services.

I Muslim: Education is highly valued, as the very first verse revealed in the Qur'an instructed Mohammad to "Read". The modern university system began in Cairo over a thousand years ago. In Australia there are around 30 Islamic schools, which follow the Australian curriculum with additional religious classes. However Muslims need not necessarily attend an Islamic school.

Cemetery

J Every community has a cemetery. A Jew's remains should be buried as soon as possible in consecrated ground, facing Jerusalem. In Israel, only a white shroud is used. A flat or upright headstone is erected. Visitors place stones on the grave. Flowers are not usually used at Jewish funerals.

Less orthodox will also perform cremations, and the ashes can be buried in the cemetery and a headstone, rose bush or other memorial can be positioned. Reject the idea of physical resurrection.

More orthodox will not allow cremation as it is felt disrespectful to the body and prevents its physical resurrection.

C Christian burial practices grew out of Jewish custom – especially in relation to the sanctity of the body – emphasising the traditional aspect of the hope of bodily resurrection. Due to modern regulations, few churches have cemeteries within their grounds as was once common, although with the rise in popularity of cremation (once forbidden to Christians) many churches now have gardens of remembrance where the ashes of the deceased are interred. Christians regard the departed faithful as continuing members of the community.

I A Muslim must be buried in the ground (soil) as soon as possible. An official cemetery is the ideal location. The body is wrapped in a white shroud (no coffin) and is laid to rest on its side, facing towards Mecca.

Home

J The home is a focus of the Jewish people. Shabbat and festivals are welcomed there, children are raised in a 'Jewish environment', and hospitality is encouraged. Study is part of life so there are many books/CDs, DVDs etc. The home should have a 'Mesusa' scroll on the doorpost. Love and respect for parents and children are essential values. Hospitality is an important element in Judaism.

C The home is regarded as the ‘domestic church’. Parents are primarily responsible for the Christian upbringing of their children. Marriage and family are highly honoured and valued by Christians.

I The home is important for the upbringing of the family and should be a loving and spiritual environment. The parents should strive to be good role models for their children. Conversely, parents – especially mothers – are to be especially honoured by their children. A well-known saying of the Prophet Muhammad is that “heaven lies at the feet of mothers.” Hospitality is also a strong virtue in Islam.

Religious leaders

J The Rabbi is usually selected by the community because of their learning, experience, charisma and reputation.

Less orthodox: Rabbis may be women as well as men.

More orthodox; Only men may be Rabbis and lead the community.

Different groups of Rabbis may select their own leaders. In Israel, there are two ‘Chief Rabbis’, though not all Rabbis or Jews accept either as their authority!

Teachers of Judaism should have a high value in the Jewish community.

C There is a great variety in models of leadership among Christians. Traditional churches have three levels of ordination: deacon, priest and bishop. Other churches have a single office of ‘the minister’ or ‘the pastor’. Some also have the lay-office of ‘elder’. Traditionally, only males were allowed to be ordained, although some churches today also ordain women clergy. Almost all churches prepare their leaders with rigorous academic and pastoral training.

I An Imam is the leader of the congregational prayer, but this is not necessarily an official position – anyone who leads the prayer is the imam for that prayer. Women cannot lead men in prayer, though they can lead other women.

Sheikh is an Arabic word meaning ‘older man’ and is often used for male scholars or religious leaders. It is not an official position. Different cultures have different names – such as *hoca* in Turkish, and *kiai* in Indonesian. Women can be religious scholars.

A Mufti is one qualified to give legal opinions about matters of Islamic law. In a majority-Muslim country, a Mufti may be appointed by the government for a particular area or the whole country. A Mufti does not necessarily have spiritual authority.

In Sunni Islam there is no clergy or spiritual hierarchy. Shi’ia Muslims (comprising about 15% of all Muslims) give Imams and Ayatollahs a special status.

Community leaders

J There are also many lay leaders who organise events (such as security) in the community, and who represent the Jewish community to the wider community. In Australia there are state bodies such as the Jewish Community

Council of Victoria, as well as a federal body. We also have people and organisations helping and supporting Israel and educating the Jewish and wider community about Israel.

C Today, in almost all the churches, male and female people (non-clergy) exercise leadership in a variety of significant ways. Christians teach that the Holy Spirit gives ‘gifts’ to each individual which are to be used for the service of all in the community – the wider community, their own church community and also in inter-church bodies like the Victorian Council of Churches and the National Council of Churches in Australia.

I Men and women with leadership qualities can become leaders in social community affairs. In Australia there are state-wide bodies representing many Muslims, such as the Islamic Council of Victoria, as well as a federal body, the Australian Federation of Islamic Councils. These bodies are not religious bodies and have no spiritual authority.

Membership

J Jewish people generally pay an annual membership to a synagogue to pay the Rabbi, building maintenance and other costs, and some of this also goes to support the communal organisations. Special arrangements are always made for those who can’t afford to pay the full amount, or anything at all.

They may also belong to other organisations such as the Jewish Museum, and may support some important charitable institutions such as Jewish Care, even though they don’t have official membership.

C Different churches determine official membership in different ways. Most accept baptism (immersion in water) as the real entry point into the community. Membership may also be determined by public confession of faith. Some memberships are more formal and require official entry on a register, others are more informal and are determined by geography (eg. living within the boundaries of a ‘parish’) or ethnicity (eg. most Greeks belong to the Greek Orthodox Church). Fees are not usually charged, although members have responsibility to support the community – sometimes ‘tithing’ (giving 10% of one’s income) to the church.

I Muslims do not need to belong to any particular mosque or congregation, though in Australia many Muslims still associate with a mosque community that has particular ethnic origins. Some Muslims have formed mosque associations which do have formal membership, but it is not required by the faith.

Whether or not someone is recognised as a Muslim is an issue between themselves and God and cannot be decided by any other groups or individuals.

KEY VALUES

Honesty and Integrity

J We derive our values from how we learn or imagine God would act. Therefore absolute honesty and integrity are key demands for a good Jewish life. We should always be trustworthy. A good reputation is the most precious gift.

C Truth or truthfulness is a virtue which consists in showing oneself true in deeds and truthful in words and actions. Jesus called himself 'The Truth' and Christians are expected to be honest and trustworthy.

I Truthfulness and honesty are essential qualities of a practising Muslim. The prophet himself was known as "The Trustworthy" even before his period of prophethood.

Helping others

J *Tzedakah* (righteousness). We have an obligation to help others, however poor we may be ourselves. The highest level is to help someone get a job so that they become self-sufficient (and to do it so you never know who they are and they never know who you are).

C Charity is essential to Christianity. Christians cannot truly claim to love God whom they cannot see if they do not show practical love for their neighbour whom they can see. Jesus taught that our neighbour is any person in need of our help. Christians should show charity to members of their own faith, but also to all people regardless of their religious belief, without expecting anything in return.

I Muslims are urged to help people as often as possible, regardless of their religion. The prophet Muhammad stated "God will help His Servant as long as God's servant helps others."

Justice

J Any society should have a robust and accessible system of justice, which does not favour the rich or poor and is independent and incorruptible. In Israel, the Supreme Court quite often overturns or refers back Government decisions.

C Justice is an important concept in Christian teaching, and it is expected that the country in which one lives will also uphold justice. It is not just a legal system, however, as justice should include equity and fairness in social relationships.

I Justice is one of the highest virtues of Islam, as it is one of the attributes of God. The Qur'an (4:135) commands to "stand out firmly for justice, as witnesses to God:" The Prophet was called "The Trustworthy". Islamic Law and teachings place great emphasis on the right of all people to justice and respect, regardless of their religion.

Peace

J Judaism is a peace-loving religion (“Seek peace and pursue it’) but not at any price. Sometimes, Judaism has had to fight for what it believes (for example against the Greeks, the Romans, the Nazis and over the past sixty years for the continued existence of the State of Israel). Peace is Shalom, the same as the Arabic ‘Salam’, and we often welcome each other with ‘Shalom Aleikhem’ – peace be with you – which is the same as the Christians, and the Muslim ‘As-Salamu Alaikum’.

C Jesus came to bring peace, but ‘not as the world gives’. By his death, Jesus made peace between human beings and God, and taught that people should live in peace (and this includes observing the notion of ‘justice’ in personal relationships). Peace is not simply the absence of war, but a society and relationships here justice is a prevailing concept. Christianity has a strong tradition of pacifism, but also a traditional teaching that sometimes war is ‘just’. As in Judaism and Islam, Christians use the greeting ‘Peace be with you’.

I The word Islam is derived from a root meaning peace, ie salaam (the same as the Hebrew ‘Shalom’). The common greeting of Muslims is ‘As-Salamu Alaikum” meaning ‘peace be upon you’. A prayer frequently recited by Muslims reads “O God, You are peace, and from You is peace, so give us life with/in Peace, God, and enter us into the Garden, the Place of Peace.”

Islam also has a complex set of principles that govern conduct of states and individuals in handling of disputes and issues of self-defence. War or fighting is permissible only under circumstances such as the defence of a land or its people. Aggression is not permitted. Individuals are not allowed to take the law into their own hands and must follow strict guidelines which protect the environment, non-combatants, places of worship etc. at all times.

Hospitality

J Abraham and Sarah are our models of hospitality. Like them, we should always be aware of strangers and the hungry and be generous with what God has given us. In particular, people should be invited to share the Shabbat meal, the Passover Seder, and the other festive meals.

C Jesus showed solidarity with outcasts and ‘sinners’ by eating with them. He often described the Kingdom of Heaven as a banquet, and made a meal (the Eucharist) a central act of the church. Thus sharing food together has an important role in Christianity. The Christian Scriptures teach: ‘Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for thereby some have entertained angels unawares” (Hebrews 13:2)

I The prophet Muhammad being the example for Muslims to follow, has many teachings with regards to hospitality and looking after the poor, hungry and strangers.

Fasting

J Yom Kippur (Day of Atonement) – 25 hour fast from food, drink and sex to ‘afflict the soul’, to pray all day without distraction.

More orthodox also fast on other days such as Tisha B’Av (9th of Av).

C Christians fast as an accompaniment to prayer and as an act of repentance. While some Christian traditions and religious groups still have strict fasting rules, most Christians, if they practise fasting at all today, do so as an act of personal spirituality. Traditional fast days are Wednesday and Friday, the days of Advent and Len, and about all, Ash Wednesday and Good Friday. Some traditions also require fasting before receiving the Eucharist. Fasting comes in two forms: a reduction of the amount of food and drink, or refraining from certain foods and drinks.

I The month of Ramadan – daily abstinence from dawn to dusk, from food, drink and marital contact – for self-purification. Also a time to purify our thoughts and to focus on being kind to others and for spiritual reflection.

LIFE CYCLE

Birth-related rituals

J Circumcision (boys – their foreskin is removed in a tiny operation at eight days old). This is said to be a ‘sign of the covenant between a Jew and God’, but is perhaps also for hygiene reasons. The baby is blessed and given his Hebrew name (every Jew has a Hebrew as well as a regular name).

Less orthodox: Baby naming – male and female babies are brought to the synagogue service and they are blessed and named.

More orthodox: The boy is named at the circumcision; a girl’s Hebrew name is announced in the synagogue with a blessing.

C Baptism (or Christening) is traditionally associated with birth, although strictly it is the first rite of initiation into Christianity and is done at whatever age someone becomes a Christian. Some Christians delay baptism until the age of reason has been attained. Baptism involves the application of water to the candidate (sometimes by immersion, sometimes by pouring) ‘in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit’. Generally infants are baptised only when their parents are practising Christians. ‘God-parents’ are sponsors assigned at the time of baptism to aid the parents in the Christian upbringing of their children.

I Prayers are said at birth when many Muslim parents read the Call to Prayer very gently into the newborn baby’s ear.

Baby naming or *aqiqa* – family and friends of the new baby gather together and prayers and blessings are recited.

Circumcision is practised for boys, preferably at an early age. A few cultures (Muslim and Animist) practise female ‘circumcision’ but this is NOT an Islamic practice and Islamic law forbids the unnecessary harming of any person.

Adolescence

J Bar Mitzvah. When a boy is 13, he can participate in the religious service and so he is 'called up' to read from the Torah and other parts (in Hebrew).

Less orthodox: Treat boys and girls (and men and women) equally, so girls celebrate Bat Mitzvah when they are 13 in exactly the same way as boys.

More orthodox: A girl is considered mature at 12. She may be part of a group celebration on a Sunday. Women reading from the Torah is becoming more acceptable in some places.

In most orthodox circles, females are not called to read from the Torah.

C Confirmation is one of the rites of initiation in the Christians church, but its practice and theology varies greatly. It signifies maturing in the Christian faith and the special gift of the Holy Spirit for Christian living. It often signifies joining a particular Christian denomination. For those baptised as infants, it is often conducted at adolescence following a period of 'catechisation' (teaching the faith). Adult converts are usually catechised before baptism and confirmed at the same time as baptism. In the Eastern churches, confirmation is called 'Chrismation' and is conducted at the same time as baptism, even for infants.

I There are no specific rituals required. Different Muslim cultures around the world, however, often have particular customs for the stages of life that are accepted as not contradicting Islam.

Children are encouraged to learn the recite the Qur'an from an early age, and when a child first finishes reciting the Qur'an from start to finish, a celebration is often held.

Marriage

J Marriage (to other Jews) is encouraged in Judaism and celibacy is discouraged.

A Jewish wedding can only be between two Jews. It is under a *Khuppa* (canopy) in the presence of family and friends (including 2 formal 'witnesses'), and God. Blessings are said, and a document is signed (*ketubah*) and finally a glass is broken.

Less orthodox interpret the broken glass as a reminder of sadness, which, like happiness, is a part of life, and also of the fragility of marriage.

More orthodox see it as a reminder of the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem, almost 2000 years ago.

A woman can only have one husband but technically a man can have multiple wives. However this was ruled out for most Jews 1000 years ago and today is very rare.

C Christianity from the beginning has practised monogamy as a sign of the fidelity between Christ and his 'bride', the Church. Traditionally Christians have regarded marriage as a 'sacrament', that is, a rite of the church, although many Christians today see marriage as a rite of the state which the Church blesses and

supports with prayer. Therefore ‘civil celebrations’ are regarded differently by different Christian traditions. The ‘celebrants’ of marriage are the husband and wife who freely consent and promise themselves to each other for life in the presence of God and witnesses. Marriage is a public – not a private – matter and is governed by law.

I Marriage in Islam is greatly encouraged and celibacy is discouraged. Marriage is considered the ideal state, and Islamic principles on relationships between the sexes reflect this. Muslims are not permitted physical contact outside a lawful marriage, which has the effect of protecting, strengthening and increasing the value and importance of marriage itself.

There are several conditions of marriage; 1) Both parties consent 2) the woman is given a dowry/gift by the husband, and 3) there are witnesses and the marriage is publicised.

Some Muslims have written marriage contracts.

The Qur’an describes spouses as being garments for one another, and speaks of the love and affection that God has created between husband and wife.

Divorce

J Whilst doing everything possible to keep a marriage together, as long as it is not harmful, Judaism has always acknowledged that sometimes marriages do not work. Since the marriage was commenced with a religious procedure, there is another religious procedure, and a document to mark the end to a marriage, called a ‘Get’, after which the two of them are free to marry again.

C Since Christian marriage has been modelled on the relationship between Christ and the Church, Christian doctrine teaches that marriage is a relationship entered into for life. Jesus taught “What God has joined together, human beings should not divide.’ However, in recent times many Christian traditions have recognised civil divorce as also signifying the end of marriage in the sight of the church, and have allowed divorced couples to remarry.

I Divorce is permissible but only as a last resort. Families are urged to work together to reconcile the parties, and if necessary to appoint an arbiter in a dispute.

Death

J The body is ritually washed and prepared in a white shroud. All are considered equal in death so only plain wooden coffins are used (in Israel, coffins are not used), and buried facing the site of the Temple in Jerusalem. There are generally evening prayers in the home for one or more nights of the first week.

Less Orthodox: Often burial, as quickly as possible, and within a few days. They also allow cremation as they do not believe the body will be needed for resurrection.

More orthodox: Allow burial only, within 24 hours if possible. The mourners tear a garment (symbolic of the torn heart), cover the mirrors, and ‘sit *shiva*’, staying at home for the first week whilst people visit.

C Christians may consider that their traditional rituals at the time of death have been overtaken by the modern funeral industry. Nevertheless, a pattern remains. Approaching the time of death, the pastor or priest will be called to lead the dying and their family in prayer, with anointing or commendation to God depending on tradition. After death, the minister plans the funeral service with the family of the deceased. The funeral usually takes place several days after the death, and is followed immediately by the burial or cremation. New rites for the placing of the ashes some time after a cremation have been devised in recent times.

I The body is ritually washed and prepared for burial in white sheets and not in a coffin.

Burial should be performed as soon as possible.

The body must be buried lying on its side and facing the direction of the Holy Kaba in the city of Mecca.

Prayers are said.

Death is seen as a natural part of life and should be accepted as God’s will.

COMMON OBSERVANCES

Food

J Most Jews are aware of the food laws, which come from various different places and periods, and keep them to some extent, the most orthodox keeping them at all times. They are known as ‘*kosher*’ which actually means ‘suitable’ (and can refer to anything suitable to use, such as a Torah scroll).

There are comprehensive lists of prohibited animals such as pigs, carrion and shellfish. Permitted animals should be killed in a particular way (*shekhita*) which is supposed to be quick and painless.

Any blood should be drained out (similar to Muslim Halal food laws).

Also milk and meat products should not be cooked or eaten in the same meal.

Cutlery and crockery should not have been used for anything unkosher.

Therefore a strictly orthodox person can only eat in a kosher home or kosher restaurant. Many people change all their utensils entirely for Passover to avoid any yeast products.

C Many Christians do have food laws – pertaining especially to times of abstinence or fasting – but there are no foods that are on the Christian’s permanent ‘forbidden’ list. Some Christians have promoted ‘temperance’, i.e. abstaining from alcohol, but this is usually on the moral grounds of the Christian abhorrence of drunkenness.

I Most foods are permissible (*halal*) with the exception of a few, notably pork/ham/bacon, carnivorous animals, carrion, blood, and alcohol. These are deemed '*haram*' (prohibited).

Animals (other than fish) must be slaughtered by a Muslim who is to invoke a prayer seeking Allah's permission to take the life of the animal, face it towards Mecca and kill it with a sharp knife in a quick and painless manner. The blood should be allowed to drain out. The process is similar to Jewish "*Kosher*" and indeed Muslims can eat kosher meat.

there is also a general Islamic principle that animals should be treated with care and respect during their life-time.

Clothing

J Less orthodox No specific rules or styles

More orthodox: emphasise modesty and do not show below their necks, or upper arms or legs. Particular mixtures of linen and wool are prohibited. Ultra-orthodox dress in the style of 17th century Poland, with black coats and fur hats and boots.

C Beyond the promotion of modesty in dress, Christians have no dress laws. Particular groups of people within the churches (for instance, clergy, nuns, monks) may adopt particular easily identified forms of dress. Ritual clothing (vestments) are often worn by those celebrating the liturgy.

I Ordinary everyday clothing that is modest and not revealing. Many adult women cover their hair with what is called the 'hijab' and also cover all parts of the body except their face and hands.

Men wear trousers rather than shorts.

Hair

J Less orthodox no specific rules or styles

More orthodox: men consider there are limitations on shaving and cutting hair, so they often have beards and sidecurls. Children's hair is not cut until they are 3 so young children have long hair and sidecurls. Married women do now show their natural hair, and cover it with a scarf or a wig.

C Traditionally, it was regarded as inappropriate for a woman to shave her head or for men to wear long hair (probably respecting gender distinctions), but little attention is given to this today. In the past (but rarely today) male Christian religious groups practised 'tonsure', or the shaving of their head, as a sign of their vows.

I Men are encouraged to keep their hair neat and tidy.

Many women wear a 'hijab' to cover their hair.

Pilgrims to Mecca are not supposed to cut their hair or nails until they have completed the Hajj (pilgrimage).

Special day of the week

J *Shabbat* (the Hebrew word Shabbat – rest) (Friday evening to Saturday evening). All should try not to work, and to mark and celebrate with their family and community, and with God.

Less orthodox: Positive aspects such as attendance at services are important. Concerns like turning lights on, avoiding use of money or driving are less significant.

More orthodox: No money is used, no food is cooked, no fires should be lit – hence no lights or electrical appliances used or vehicle driven as they may make a spark.

C Christians observe Sunday as their day of worship, in commemoration of the resurrection of Jesus on the first day of the week (the ‘eighth day’ or the first day of the ‘new creation’). Unnecessary work or sport is discouraged, especially if it takes priority over attendance at worship, which in some traditions is compulsory.

I Friday (*jum’a* or congregation) is the holy day of the week for Muslims due to a special noon prayer that is said in the mosque. Muslims try to get to the Mosque for the prayer and the Friday sermon or teaching. Although men and women can attend, only men are required to.

In many countries where the majority are Muslim, Friday is a weekly holiday.

Other prohibitions

J We should not do anything to mark or harm our bodies. Therefore smoking should no longer be allowed and dangerous drugs are prohibited. More orthodox will not have tattoos, or pierce their ears, nose or other parts. Excessive alcohol (except on the Festival of Purim) is prohibited. Sex outside marriage or with a person married to someone else is discouraged or prohibited. More orthodox reject homosexuality.

C Christians are currently involved in internal debates on many ethical issues. The traditional total prohibition of some practices is today being challenged. Many of these controversial issues are about sexual ethics or bioethics, such as homosexuality, abortion, euthanasia, contraception, etc.

I Prohibitions (*haram*) are things that are considered damaging for the individual and for society as a whole; gambling, alcohol, sex outside marriage, drugs and various food items.

Muslims are also not allowed to harm or disfigure themselves (most would say plastic surgery and tattoos are forbidden), or other people, animals or the environment.

BAHA'I

ORIGINS

What does the name mean?

“Baha” is an Arabic word that means “Glory” and “Baha’u’llah” means “Glory of God”. Hence “Baha’i” means a follower of Baha’u’llah or a follower of the Glory of God .

To where do we trace our faith back?

The Baha’i Faith originated in Iran in the mid-nineteenth century.

Key people

Baha’u’llah (1817-1892) was the Prophet-Founder of the Baha’i Faith. He is considered by Baha’is to be the most recent “Manifestation” or messenger of God.

The Bab (1819-1850) was a prophet who predicted the coming of Baha’u’llah. Abdu’l-Baha (1844-1921) was the eldest son of Baha’u’llah, who appointed him as His successor. While not a prophet, Abdu’l-Baha is considered to be the “perfect exemplar” of a Baha’i life.

Key Book(s) and Texts

The large body of Baha’i Scripture includes the Writings of the Bab, Baha’u’llah and Abdu’l-Baha. The *Kitab-i-Aqdas (Most Holy Book)* by Baha’u’llah sets out the main laws to be followed by Baha’is.

Prophets

The founders of the great world religions are all recognised as prophets. This includes Krishna, Buddha, Zoroaster, Abraham, Moses, Jesus, Muhammad, the Bab and Baha’u’llah. It is believed there were ancient prophets whose names have been lost over time.

Final prophets?

Baha’u’llah is the most recent prophet, but God will continue to send messengers every thousand years or so to guide humanity in accordance with the needs of the age.

After the final prophets?

There is no final prophet.

About Jesus

Jesus is recognised as a prophet of God. In the Baha’i Writings Jesus is referred to as the “Son of Mary” and the “Spirit of God.”

Holy land(s)/places

The most holy places for Baha’is are the shrines of the Bab and Baha’u’llah which are located in the Haifa-Acre region in northern Israel. Baha’u’llah was

sent to Acre as a prisoner of the Ottoman empire. He passed away and was buried near there in 1892. There are also holy places associated with the lives of the Bab and Baha'u'llah in Iran, Iraq and Turkey.

Pilgrimage

Adult Baha'is are encouraged to make a nine-day pilgrimage to the shrines of the Bab and Baha'u'llah in the Holy Land. Baha'i pilgrimage sites in Iran and Iraq are no longer in the possession of the community.

Legal system

The *Kitab-i-Aqdas* (*Most Holy Book*) and other scriptural texts set out the main laws and ordinances of the Baha'i Faith. Some of the laws are not yet binding as they apply to a future Baha'i society. The laws of personal conduct require a high standard of moral and ethical behaviour.

CURRENT DATA

How many in Australia (approx)

There are 17,000 Baha'is in Australia.

How many Worldwide

There are more than five million Baha'is around the world. Baha'is can be found in almost every country.

BELIEFS

Revelation?

The Writings of Baha'u'llah are believed by Baha'is to be a direct revelation from God. Many of these Writings exist in their original form, sometimes in the handwriting of the prophet Himself or of His secretary.

Day of Judgement

The Day of Judgement is the time of spiritual awakening, when people are called to account for their past deeds.

Life after death

The soul is created at the moment of conception and progresses to the next world following the death of the physical body. The soul is immortal and travels through "worlds upon worlds" in its spiritual journey ever closer to God.

Heaven

Heaven is not a physical place, but a metaphor for the soul's state of spiritual nearness to God, the ultimate purpose of its creation.

Hell

Like heaven, hell is a metaphorical representation of a soul's spiritual distance from God. After death, those who have moved near to God spiritually through the development of spiritual qualities will rejoice, and those who are distance from Him will lament-- though they can progress through prayer and by the mercy of God.

Messiah

The Baha'i Writings refer to Jesus Christ as the Messiah.

Messianic Time

Baha'u'llah is believed to be the Promised One of all previous religions and ages.

All-Powerful God?

God in essence is unknowable, being exalted above human attributes and understanding. We can learn about Him by studying His attributes as reflected by His messengers. Among His many names and attributes is "All-Powerful", but our understanding of this is essentially limited because we are the created, not the creator.

One All-Knowing God?

"All-Knowing" is one of the names and attributes of the One God.

Do you have to believe in God?

Yes. For Baha'is, the first duty of the soul is to recognise the messenger of God and to observe His teachings.

COMMUNICATING WITH GOD

Most Common Names for God

God has many names and attributes, including the Almighty, All-Glorious, All-Knowing, All-Bountiful, Ever-Forgiving, the Help in Peril.

Prayer

Baha'is are encouraged to pray frequently, using the many prayers that have been revealed in the Baha'i writings. There is an obligatory prayer to be said every day, with individuals choosing whether to say the short, medium or long versions. Some of the obligatory prayers involve specified movement and prostration. Prayers are not to be said communally (ie. in unison), with the exception of the prayer for the dead, which is recited at the graveside.

Where?

Prayer may take place anywhere. Any place where God has been mentioned and praised is considered to be blessed.

Language of prayer

Baha'i writings have been translated into many languages. Individuals are encouraged to pray in their own language. Some Baha'is prefer to say prayers in Persian and Arabic since these were the original languages of revelation.

Singing and Music

Music is praised as a ladder for the soul, and prayers are often chanted melodiously. Within a Baha'i House of Worship (also known as a Temple) the human voice must be unaccompanied, but musical instruments may be used elsewhere.

Prayer direction

Obligatory prayers are said facing in the direction of the Shrine of Baha'u'llah in the Holy Land.

Prayer clothing

There is no specified clothing required for prayer. Clothing worn in the House of Worship should be respectful.

CALENDAR

Day starts

The day begins at sunset.

Calendar type

The Baha'i or "Badi'" calendar is a solar calendar comprising 19 months of 19 days. Four additional days (five in a leap year) are added between the 18th and 19th months to complete the solar year.

Main Festivals/Holy Days of the year

- Ayyam-i-Ha (Intercalary Days): a period of celebration devoted to charity, gift-giving and festivities (26 February-1 March)
- Fasting month: Baha'is aged 15 to 70, with some exemptions such as illness, abstain from food and drink between sunrise and sunset (2-20 March)
- Naw Ruz: Baha'i New Year (21 March)
- Festival of Ridvan: the most important holy festival, marking [Baha'u'llah's](#) declaration of His mission as a Messenger of God (21 April-2 May)
- Declaration of [the Bab](#): marking the Bab's declaration of His mission as Messenger of God (23 May)
- Ascension of Baha'u'llah, which commemorates His death (29 May)
- Martyrdom of the Bab (9 July)
- Birth of the Bab (20 October)
- Birth of Baha'u'llah (12 November)
- Day of the Covenant: Commemorating Baha'u'llah's appointment of his son, [Abdu'l-Baha](#), as the One to whom His followers should turn after His passing (26 November)
- Ascension of Abdu'l-Baha: commemorates His death (28 November)

RELIGIOUS INSTITUTIONS

Community Centre

The Baha'i community is organised on a locality basis that coincides with local government boundaries. Depending on its size, a local Baha'i community may own a community centre, lease premises or hold events in the homes of individual members.

There is one Baha'i House of Worship in Australia, which is located in Sydney. Sometimes called a temple, it is a place of worship open to people of all religions. In the future, a number of subsidiary buildings will be added (e.g. hospital, school, hospice) to make the House of Worship a centre of community life.

In the Community Centre

There are no specified requirements for a local Baha'i Centre.

A Baha'i House of Worship is a domed building with nine sides and entrances, symbolising its openness to people of all backgrounds. It may not contain any idols or figurative representations.

School

Education is highly valued and is regarded as a life-long process. The education of girls is considered as important as it of boys. Baha'i education classes are provided for children in each locality where there are Baha'is, usually on weekends or outside school hours. Baha'i education classes are open to all. There are no dedicated Baha'i schools in Australia, although these do exist in other parts of the world. Adults are expected to continue their spiritual education, often by attending Baha'i study circles.

Cemetery

When Baha'is die, they should be buried in a coffin (not cremated) in a cemetery within one hour's journey of the place of death. There are no dedicated Baha'i cemeteries in Australia, although some cemeteries contain a Baha'i section.

Home

The family is the basic building block of society. The home should be a place of love and unity, the effects of which will ultimately extend to the broader society. Baha'is are encouraged to exemplify Baha'i teachings about gender equality in their family lives, with neither partner dominating the other. Baha'is often open their homes to Baha'i activities such as devotional gatherings, children's classes and "firesides" where others can come to learn about the Baha'i Faith.

Religious leaders

The Baha'i Faith has no clergy or equivalent. Elected institutions take care of the affairs of the community (see below), while each individual is responsible for his or her own spiritual knowledge and development.

Community leaders

Elected bodies of lay believers look after the affairs of the Baha'i community. A nine-member Local Spiritual Assembly is elected annually from among the adult Baha'is living in each locality. Similar bodies, known as Regional Baha'i Councils, are elected at the State/Territory level. Hence the Baha'i Council for Victoria is responsible for the affairs of the Baha'i community at the State level in Victoria. There is also a National Spiritual Assembly, which is elected annually at the National Baha'i Convention. Authority is invested in the elected institutions, not the individual members. Both men and women can be elected and serve together.

Membership

Individuals become members of the Australian Baha'i Community by signing a "declaration card" in which they recognise Baha'u'llah as the bearer of God's message for this day, and commit to strive to following His teachings. Membership also implies acceptance of the authority of the institutions that administer the affairs of the Baha'i community.

KEY VALUES

Honesty and Integrity

Truthfulness is regarded as the foundation of all human virtues. The stability of society and all human affairs are dependent upon it

Helping Others

Service to humanity is a Baha'i ideal. Baha'u'llah taught that the individual should "cleave unto that which will profit mankind." Service to humanity is service to God. All have an obligation to contribute to the advancement of civilisation. The wealthy have a particular obligation to assist the poor.

Justice

Justice is the "best beloved of all things" in the sight of God. Human unity and social order cannot be secured without justice. In addition to observing justice in our dealings with others, we should work to secure the rights of those who have been denied them.

Peace

Peace is the chief instrument for the protection of all humanity. Baha'u'llah called upon the leaders and rulers of the world to reconcile among themselves and to establish global institutions by which universal peace could be upheld. No enduring peace will be achieved without addressing social issues including racism, the disparity between rich and poor, unbridled nationalism, conflict between religions, the equality of men and women, universal education, and the need for an international auxiliary language.

Hospitality

Hospitality, loving-kindness and understanding should be shown towards all, especially those who are strangers and may require assistance.

Fasting

The final month of the Baha'i year, from 2-20 March, is designated as a fasting month. Baha'is between 15 and 70 abstain from food and drink between sunrise and sunset. Those unable to fast due to sickness or other reasons are exempt. The purpose of fasting is spiritual. The fast is intended to be a period of meditation and prayer, during which individuals reorient their lives away from selfish, material desires and towards the inner life of the soul.

LIFE CYCLE**Birth-related rituals**

There are no designated rituals related to birth. Parents may hold a naming ceremony if they wish, but there is no set format to be followed.

Adolescence

Fifteen is considered to be the age of maturity in matters of faith. From the age of 15, youth make an independent decision as to whether they wish to be members of the Baha'i community. Personal laws such as obligatory prayer and fasting apply from the age of 15 onwards. There is no designated ritual or ceremony associated with turning 15.

Marriage

Marriage is a spiritual as well as a physical relationship. The Baha'i marriage requirement is very simple. Both individuals recite, before approved witnesses, the marriage vow: "We will all, verily, abide by the Will of God." The Baha'i marriage ceremony is recognised under Australian law when conducted by authorised Baha'i marriage celebrants. Baha'i marriage may only take place with the consent of all living parents of the bride and groom. The purpose of this law is to ensure unity among family members. Inter-racial marriage is encouraged, and Baha'is may marry those of other religions.

Divorce

Divorce is permitted but strongly discouraged. There are no specific grounds for divorce other than antipathy between the partners. Divorce can only be granted following a "year of patience" in which the couple live apart. They should endeavour to reconcile and may not court a new partner during this period.

Death

Death is a natural part of human life. The departed are mourned but it is recognised that the soul is eternal. The dead must be buried in a coffin following

the recitation of a specific prayer, and within an hour's journey from the place of death. A memorial gathering may be held subsequently at which prayers are read for the progress of the soul towards God in the next world.

COMMON OBSERVANCES

Food

There are no dietary restrictions except that alcohol must not be consumed. A simple diet is encouraged.

Clothing

There are no clothing restrictions, but moderation and propriety are encouraged.

Hair

There are no restrictions on the hair.

Special day of the week

Baha'is in each locality gather together on or near the first day of each Baha'i month (ie. every 19 days) to celebrate a "Feast." This event includes a devotional portion, an administrative portion for community consultation, and a social portion for hospitality and fellowship.

Other prohibitions

Baha'is are not permitted to consume alcohol or mind-altering drugs. Sexual relationships are not permitted outside marriage. Gambling is forbidden. Baha'is may not engage in partisan politics, although they are permitted to vote. Gossip or "backbiting" is categorically condemned.

ORIGINS

What does the name mean?

Brahma Kumaris – Sons and Daughters of Brahma - Brahma Means ‘Creation’

To where do we trace our faith back?

Originally in Sindh, Pakistan in 1936, then Mt Abu India since 1955

Key people

Dada Lekraj now known as Prajapita Brahma (People’s Father)
Senior sisters and brothers who are trustees of the University

Key Book(s) & Texts

Spoken words of Supreme Soul through medium of Prajapita Brahma.
Transcribed and revised daily.

Prophets

None. Prajapita Brahma is seen as elder brother, the first man to walk this path, a guide but also a pilgrim on the journey

Holy Land(s)/places

Headquarters of the Brahma Kumaris World Spiritual University is considered a pilgrimage place or home, a place of study, tapasya (concentrated contemplation) and harmonious community living. It provides an environment to re-charge oneself spiritually.

CURRENT DATA

How many in Australia (approx)

552 who are regular dedicated members
2000 who are in contact and attend programs and classes on an irregular basis.

How many Worldwide

600,000

BELIEFS

Day of Judgement?

Seen as the time when a person has full realisation about themselves, usually at the time of leaving one’s physical body.

Life after death

Yes, process of birth and re-birth – only as human beings, not into animal species.

Heaven

A 'Golden Age' on earth where man and nature are in total harmony.
A time of complete happiness.

Hell

An 'Iron Age' on earth where man and nature are in total disharmony.
A time where there is a lot of sorrow.

All-Powerful God?

God is understood as a Source of Light who has a role to play when sorrow has reached its highest point and human beings are in their 'iron aged' state. This role is to give knowledge to enable human beings to transform themselves back into their original 'golden-aged' state so that a golden age can be re-created practically on earth.

One All-knowing God?

God is understood to be the Source of Truth, but each person is responsible for their own account of give and take. God provides the tools for this self realisation only.

Do you have to believe in God?

It helps, but many people have started studying whilst being Atheist.
Studying the knowledge is the key to faith – for some it develops into a new and close relationship with God, for some it enhances their belief in God.

COMMUNICATING WITH GOD**Most Common Names for God**

Shiva, Supreme Soul

Communication

Relationship through thought in meditation and in action.
Practice of Meditation is an important part of the study – silent with eyes open.

Where?

Meditation Centres which teach courses in Raja Yoga.
Practitioners are encouraged to have a meditation space in their homes if possible and practice meditation regularly throughout the day for a minute at a time.

Singing and Music

Music and Inspirational Songs are sometimes played during or at the end of meditation sessions. There is no official communal singing.

Dress

Practitioners are encouraged to bathe before attending sessions and wear clean clothes for communal hygiene comfort.

No special clothing required except being modest. Some people prefer white clothes and many teachers and residents of Centres and Retreat Centres wear white clothes.

CALENDAR**Day starts**

Recommended for advanced practitioners
4am meditation followed by 6am spiritual class.

Calendar type

Belief in 5,000 year cycle of time.

Main Festivals/ Holy Days of the year

Some Hindu Moon festival days along with Australian festival days.

The aim in celebrating is to embrace the original spiritual values associated with those festivals.

RELIGIOUS INSTITUTIONS**Community Centre**

Brahma Kumaris Raja Yoga Centres – established with residents, to provide a place where people come to learn and practice Raja Yoga.

Residents are under the guidance of appointed regional and national co-ordinators.

Retreat Centres

Established with resident to provide a place where people come to learn and practice Raja Yoga. Retreat Centres provide residential hospitality for weekend retreats and courses.

Residents are under the guidance of appointed regional and national co-ordinators.

Membership

No fees – membership is by self-selection with regard to alignment with the teachings and principles.

KEY VALUES

Peace and Purity

Fasting

No physical practices of fasting. The fasting is with regard to avoiding wasteful thinking.

LIFE CYCLE

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COMMON OBSERVANCES

Food

Vegetarian satvic

Clothing

Modest

Hair

No restrictions – many people prefer simple, natural hairstyle.

Special day of the week

Thursday – food cooked and offered in general morning class and shared with everyone.

Other prohibitions

No Alcohol

No Drugs of dependence (prescribed medication is fine)

Celibacy is observed for those wishing to fully embrace the values and stay at the Headquarters.

BUDDHISM

ORIGINS

What does the name mean?

Buddha Dhamma means the nature of this existence (world) as seen, understood and revealed by the Buddha. The Buddha saw and expounded the true nature of things, which is not obvious to the untrained mind. These properties of nature are independent of Him, independent of time, independent of all other living beings and independent of all other things.

While the word “Buddhism” is used to describe the Buddha Dhamma, according to The Buddha himself, Buddha Dhamma does not belong to an “-ism” as it only reveals the true nature of phenomena, such as gravity. Therefore, the word “Buddhism” is used in the following text to mean the Buddha Dhamma.

As found in the original scriptures, the Buddha did not encourage the use of titles such as “Buddhists”, as such demarcations may open the potential for conflicts. However, for the purpose of this document, the term ‘Buddhist’ is used to mean ‘a follower of the Buddha’s guidance as found in the Buddhist Scriptures’.

There are no ritualistic processes that would convert a non-Buddhist to a Buddhist; this can only be done by following the Buddha Dhamma. As following Buddha Dhamma is known only to the individual, it is impossible for anyone else to apply the label “Buddhist” to any other person.

Although most people consider the Buddha as a teacher, according to original scriptures He was not a teacher but a GUIDE. As He had reached the ultimate bliss of *Nirvana* Himself, He was in a position to guide another to the same goal. He only showed the path and it is the onus of the individual to follow that path.

To where do we trace our faith back?

In Buddhism, the word *faith* is used in a different sense. In fact the word *faith* does not exist in the Guidance of the Buddha. Instead He used the term *Conviction (Saddha)*. Just as when a patient goes to a doctor, he has a certain conviction that once the doctor’s prescriptions and instructions are followed he will be cured, likewise one who follows the instructions of the Buddha will be able to cure the unsatisfactoriness of this life. As the patient is being cured, his conviction increases; likewise the followers of the Dhamma increase their conviction through the results they experience. As such there is no *faith* or *belief* necessary other than the conviction needed to start the practice.

Key people

Shakyamuni Gautama (563BC-483BC) is the key figure identified with present Buddhism. “Buddha” is a title given to a person who has seen and understood the true nature of things without the help of any other person. There have been an

innumerable number of Buddhas in the past according to Buddha Dhamma. It is explained that a new Buddha will only arise when the Buddha Dhamma from previous Buddhas is not available in the world.

According to scriptures, there have been four Buddhas (*Kakusanda*, *Konagamana*, *Kashyapa*, *Gautama*) in the present eon (*Kalpa*) and one more Buddha (*Maithriya*) to come before the end of the present eon. An eon (*Kalpa*) has been explained as: if a 16km x 16km x 16km cube is filled with mustard seeds and every hundred years one mustard seed is removed, provided that there are no other means of removing mustard seeds from the cube, the time taken to empty the cube is shorter than a *Kalpa*.

Key Book(s) and Texts

The original Gautham Buddha's Scriptures are found in the *Tipitaka* (Three Baskets) which contains three main sections, namely, *Vinaya Pitaka* (Basket of discipline), *Sutta Pitaka* (Basket of Discourses) and *Abhidhamma Pitaka* (Basket of Higher Phenomena). Most of these books contain the words of the Buddha and his great disciples in the original spoken language *Magadhi (Pali)*. These books were carried in an oral tradition for a length of time and then written at a later stage. These books were compiled in such a way that they are mutually verifying; therefore, by reading and comparing all books (57 Bible sized Volumes in the Buddha Jayanthi Tipitaka Publication) their authenticity and accuracy can be verified.

There are many other books written by present day monks and lay people which should be compared with the original teachings before their accuracy and authenticity can be verified.

Prophets

The concept of "Prophet" is not present in Buddhism. It recognises the fact that all living beings are impermanent, which leads to uncertainty, which in turn leads to unsatisfactoriness. Buddhism also recognises the fact that all intelligent beings are looking for ways of salvation and there are various religious beliefs and teachings towards this goal. As a result, Buddhism does not promote any conflict towards any religion and promotes loving kindness (unconditional love- *Metta*), compassion (*Karuna*), altruistic joy (*Muditha*) and equanimity (*Upeksha*) towards all living beings.

Final prophets?

This concept is not present in the Guidance of Buddha (Buddha Dhamma).

After the final prophets?

This concept is not present in the Guidance of Buddha (Buddha Dhamma).

About Jesus

Buddhism respects persons such as Jesus, Mohammad, Baha'u'llah, Mahatma Gandhi, Krishna, Sai Baba, etc., and you, for good deeds done.

Holy land(s)/places

The most holy places for the followers of the Buddha's Guidance are the places related to Gautama Buddha in India. Place of Birth (Lumbini), Place of Enlightenment (Buddha Gaya), Place of delivery of the first discourse (Varanasi) and the place of passing away or "*Parinibbana*" (Kusinara) are considered the most holy places for the followers of Buddha, his guidance (Dhamma), and his Enlightened Disciples (Arya Maha Sangha).

Pilgrimage

Buddhists are encouraged to make a pilgrimage to above holy sites in India.

Legal system

According to the Buddha's guidance, a person who has seen the fear of continued existence (*Samsara*) and has left the household life in order to seek *Nirvana* (the ultimate bliss achievable in this very life) is called a Monk. The *Vinaya Pitaka* sets out the main rules and ordinances for ordained monks.

Concepts such as Justice, Crime and Punishment are not found in the Buddha Dhamma in the context of current meanings.

CURRENT DATA

How many in Australia (approx)

According to the Australian Bureau of Statistics, there were 418,749 Buddhists in Australia in 2006.

How many Worldwide

There are over 1 billion Buddhists around the world and is increasing at a greater rate due to increased availability of Dhamma. Such persons can be found in almost every country.

BELIEFS

Revelation?

The Buddha uncovered Four Noble Truths –there is unsatisfactoriness in life, this unsatisfactoriness is there for a reason, this unsatisfactoriness can be eradicated, and the way to eradicate this unsatisfactoriness (the Noble Eightfold Path).

Day of Judgement

This concept is not present in the Guidance of Buddha.

Life after death

The concept of soul is discarded. A living being is described as a continually changing mental and physical process where the identity is “in-flux” at all times. This process would take many forms throughout the repeated existence in this *Samsara* until attachment to this process is totally eliminated, at which time *Nirvana*, the ultimate bliss, is attained. Nirvana is experienced by the living, who cease to ‘be’ when they die.

Heaven

The Buddha revealed six heavenly planes of existence. One can reach these existences by behaving well. Heaven is not eternal.

Hell

The Buddha revealed four hellish planes of existence. One can reach these existences by behaving badly. Hell is not eternal.

Messiah

This concept is not present in the Guidance of Buddha.

Messianic Time

This concept is not present in the Guidance of Buddha.

All-Powerful God?

This concept is not present in the Guidance of Buddha. However, the Buddha revealed the existence of divine powers who consider themselves as All-Powerful Gods (*Brahmanimantha Sutta – MN-49*).

One All-Knowing God?

This concept is not present in the Guidance of Buddha. However, the Buddha revealed the existence of divine powers who would consider themselves as All-Knowing Gods (*Brahmanimantha Sutta – MN-49*).

Do you have to believe in God?

This concept is not present in the Guidance of Buddha.

According to the guidance of the Buddha, every thing happens due to reasons (The law of Cause and Effect). It is our ignorance that prevents us from seeing the reasons. Once such ignorance is eliminated through the practise of the Path revealed and practised by the Buddha and his enlightened disciples, any person would be able to eventually eliminate this very ignorance that binds us to this *Samsaric* existence. Such release is considered *Nirvana*, the ultimate bliss.

COMMUNICATING WITH GOD

Most Common Names for God

This concept is not present in the Guidance of Buddha.

Prayer

This concept is not present in the Guidance of Buddha.

As everything happens due to reasons, to change things one should change the reasons. Therefore, in general, the concept of prayer (asking for things to happen) does not have a place in the guidance of the Buddha.

However, the Buddha revealed the presence of Divine Beings who have higher powers than ordinary human beings. When we behave in a way that is pleasing to such higher beings, they may volunteer their support even without being asked for it. Furthermore, the Buddha also revealed the existence of invisible beings (who have certain higher powers compared to ordinary human beings) who may answer prayers depending on the benefits they get. However, this kind of activity relates to our ordinary dealings in the present world and does not lead to eradication of unsatisfactoriness or attaining *Nirvana*.

Where to conduct prayer?

While prayer is not present in the Guidance of Buddha, practising Generosity and Virtues leading to Meditation is an essential part of it. For Meditation, the Buddha recommended appropriate quiet spaces.

Language of prayer

This concept is not present in the Guidance of Buddha.

Singing and Music

Singing or music does not have any special place in the guidance of the Buddha. Chanting is sometimes used as a method of relaxation.

Prayer direction

This concept is not present in the Guidance of Buddha.

Prayer clothing

This concept is not present in the Guidance of Buddha. Clothing worn in the Temple should be respectful. It is traditional practice (even from the time of Buddha) to wear white clothes for their apparent purity.

CALENDAR

Day starts

While this concept does not have any significance in the Buddha Dhamma, in general the day begins at sunrise. Monks have their recommended daily meal before midday.

Calendar type

While this concept does not have any significance in the Buddha Dhamma, the calendar used in the Buddha's time was a lunar calendar comprising 13 months of 28 days. Full-moon day had significance at the time, as nighttime functions were possible without artificial lighting. This practice continues today. The day of Buddha's passing away is considered the 1st day of the calendar. The Vesak full moon day (the anniversary of Gautama Buddha's Birth, Enlightenment and Passing away) is considered New Year's Day in the "Buddhist" Calendar.

Main Festivals/Holy Days of the year

- Vesak Full-moon day: occurs on the full moon day of May. This is the most important day for the followers of Buddha Dhamma. People use this day to reflect on the virtues of Buddha, Dhamma (Guidance) and Sangha (who followed guidance and attained *Nirvana*) and to practice Dhamma. Also it is traditional to have other types of mundane celebrations for this event.
- Full Moon Day of each Month: Traditionally this day is dedicated for spiritual development for the followers of the Buddha Dhamma. It is general practice to observe higher precepts on this day.
- Rains Retreat: The three month period from Full-moon day of July to full-moon day of October is considered the rains retreat. This time is dedicated for special spiritual development of the monks and the lay people. Monks are not supposed to travel in this period. A day in the month from October full moon day to November full moon day is selected for Katina Celebration for temples. In this celebration a new robe is given to a selected monk.
- There may be other days significant to various cultures and traditions.

RELIGIOUS INSTITUTIONS

While the original guidance of the Buddha did not promote Institutionalised Religion, over time different institutions were created due to various temporal influences. All of these institutions consider the Buddha as their leader and *Nirvana* as the state of ultimate bliss.

Local Temples

The followers of Buddha Dhamma are organised on a locality basis around temples. Depending on its size, a local Temple may own a building, lease premises or hold events in the community halls. These temples are generally led by ordained monks of a particular order.

While certain worship practises may differ from temple to temple, in general, it is a place of worship open to people of all religions, races, genders, social status and ages. The residing monks have the ability to give instructions to lay people based on Buddha Dhamma. Also temples may have large number of books available for borrowing for learning purposes. Once a basic knowledge is gathered, practising the Dhamma will be up to each individual.

In the Temple

There are various traditional differences and variation in practice between temples. In general, they are warm and welcoming places as all followers of Buddha are supposed to be promoting and practising generosity, unconditional love, compassion, altruistic joy, equanimity and higher virtues. Many religious ceremonies offer food free of charge at meal times.

School

Education is highly valued and is regarded as a life-long process. The education of girls is considered as important as it of boys. Buddha Dhamma education classes are provided for children in each locality where there is a temple, usually on weekends or outside school hours. Dhamma education classes are open to all. There are a few schools founded on the Buddha Dhamma in Australia.

Cemetery

In accordance with Buddha Dhamma, birth and death are inevitable facts of life unless you are an enlightened one. There are certain traditional ceremonies for the departed, which vary with culture. Generally, cremation or burial is used. It really does not matter how one treats a corpse. It is how the dead person lived his life (righteous or not-righteous) that really matters. Organ donation is highly encouraged.

Home

The individual is the most important element in the Buddha's Guidance. It is by improving an individual that a family and then a society can be improved. The home should be a place of love and unity, the effects of which will ultimately extend to the broader society. Followers of Buddha Dhamma are encouraged to exemplify Buddha's guidance about unconditional love, compassion, altruistic joy and equanimity in their family lives, with neither person dominating the other. All followers are encouraged to observe five precepts (refrain from Killing any living beings, refrain from taking what is not given to them, refrain from participating in sexual misconduct, refrain from being untruthful and refrain from taking intoxicants) as it will lead to a peaceful self, family and society. Also, all followers of Buddha Dhamma are encouraged to practise generosity, virtues and meditation that will lead to wisdom.

Religious leaders

According to scriptures the leader of the followers of Buddha Dhamma is Buddha Dhamma it self. There are certain leaders related to various institutions. Religious leaders are supposed to follow the Buddha Dhamma to a greater degree so that they can form an example for the lay followers.

Community leaders

There are certain community leaders related to various institutions. They also are supposed to follow the Buddha Dhamma to a higher degree so that they can form an example for their colleagues and followers.

Membership

There is no ritual to convert one to a follower of Buddha Dhamma (“Buddhist”). One can become a Buddhist only by following the Buddha Dhamma.

KEY VALUES

Honesty and Integrity

Truthfulness is regarded as the foundation of all human virtues. The stability of society and all human affairs are dependent upon it

Helping Others

Unconditional Love to all is a “Buddhist” ideal. The Buddha mentioned that individuals should develop themselves, both materially and spiritually, before they are able to help others. The Buddha emphasised the fact that one who is stuck in mud will not be able help another stuck in mud to get out of it. As such, The Buddha prescribed a path that can only be followed by an individual as his own experience (such as learning to swim or riding a bicycle) to elevate himself from the common problems. Once this is achieved, this person is capable of helping others to come up to his level not any higher. Therefore, The Buddha emphasised the continual development of the individual, followed by the development of others. Everyone has a responsibility to contribute to the material and spiritual advancement of themselves and others. The wealthy have a particular ability to assist the poor, although helping others may not be limited by one’s wealth.

Justice

While righteousness and virtues are highly venerated in the guidance of the Buddha, the term Justice or the concepts of Crime and Punishment are not emphasised or encouraged. Followers are encouraged to lead a life that doesn’t lead to remorse.

Peace

Peace is the chief instrument for the protection of all humanity. The Buddha once mentioned that all leaders and members of both human and divine worlds say that they would love Peace. Ironically, while saying this they all fight each other!!! The Buddha revealed the root causes of this situation as “envy” and “lack of generosity” (not liking others enjoying their possessions). Unless individuals can overcome these two natures, no lasting Peace may be achieved (*Sakkapanna Sutta, DN-21*). According to the Buddha, only by developing wisdom through practising generosity, virtues and concentration would one be able to overcome these fetters.

Hospitality

Hospitality, loving-kindness, compassion, altruistic joy and equanimity should be shown towards **all** living beings (including insects, snakes and rodents) without any boundaries or limitations.

Fasting

The Buddha has encouraged the followers of Buddha Dhamma to have only one meal per day. He did not give a special value to meals rather than as a mere essential to maintain life.

LIFE CYCLE

Birth-related rituals

There are no designated rituals related to birth. *Birth* is considered the root cause of *Death*!

Adolescence

There are no designated rituals or conditions related to adolescence. In general, the age of seven is considered as the minimum level of mental development necessary to realise *Nirvana*.

Marriage

There are no designated rituals related to marriage. However, different cultures and traditions may have their own rituals and processes, which are generally there to help the couple to become a responsible family unit. In the scriptures, there are many instances of devout followers of the Buddha wedding partners of other faiths.

Divorce

Other than the fact that virtuous living will eliminate the potential for divorce, there are no specific guidance or judgements with respect to divorce.

Death

Death is an inevitable nature of human life. Mourning is not encouraged, but is recognised as a property of a less developed mind. The dead may be cremated or buried in any convenient and acceptable way. A memorial gathering may be held subsequently, at which recitals are made in order to reflect on and understand this inevitability that we all have to face. Special meritorious deeds would be conducted and the merits will be offered to invisible beings. The Buddha has revealed that there are certain forms of invisible beings who may improve their existences by rejoicing in the good acts of other people (merits).

COMMON OBSERVANCES

Food

Moderation is encouraged. The Buddha emphasised that food is there for a purpose, ie to sustain this life. Therefore, no unnecessary prominence needs to be given to food.

Clothing

Moderation is encouraged. The Buddha emphasised that clothing is there for a purpose, ie to provide protection from cold, heat, insect attacks, dust, wind, offer privacy and in general help to sustain this life. Therefore, no unnecessary prominence needs to be given to clothing.

Hair

There are no restrictions on hair. Monks shave their heads and facial hair.

Special day of the week

Any time that can be put aside for spiritual development can be considered as a special day of the week. Generally, a day in the weekend would be used for this purpose.

Other prohibitions

Five precepts are the code of conduct compulsory for lay followers of the Buddha's Guidance if they are interested in developing themselves. They are:

1. Refrain from killing **any** living beings and promote good will and loving kindness towards **all** living beings.
2. Refrain from taking what is not given and promote generosity by giving our things to others for **their** benefit.
3. Refrain from sexual misconduct and not support such acts
4. Refrain from falsehood and be truthful.
5. Refrain from taking intoxicants (Drugs and alcohol) that would hinder the clear operation of the mind.

Guidance of All Buddhas

To refrain from all unskilful (harmful) deeds, to carry out only skilful (helpful) deeds, and to tame one's mind is the guidance of all Buddhas.

Patience, letting go, not having ill will towards anyone, not engaging in any conflicts, not harming anyone and not bringing terror to anyone is the guidance of all Buddhas.

Eradication of greed (attachment), eradication of hatred (anger) and eradication of delusion (ignorance) is the guidance of all Buddhas.

May all beings be well and happy!

HINDUISM

ORIGINS

What does the name mean?

It should be pointed out that the word “*Hindu*” is not found in any of the classical writings of India. Nor can it be traced to the classical Indian languages, such as Sanskrit or Tamil. This word was introduced by Muslims from provinces next to India. There is a river Sindhu bordering the north western provinces of India and since the Muslims there could not pronounce Sindhu properly, they instead called the river Hindu and the inhabitants of this tract of land they called Hindus. Under the general name Hinduism one finds many distinct traditions: the worship of Vishnu or Krishna (*Vaisnavism*), the worship of the Goddess (*Shaktism*), The worship of Shiva (*Shaivism*), and many minor cults and religious sects.

To where do we trace our faith back?

Historically, Hinduism is thousands of years old, it encompasses the development of religions of India since the ancient times, which in turn hark back to prehistoric *Vedic* religions. Hinduism is so old that it has no known founder, it is the only major religion without one.

Key people

There are literally thousands of key people within the Vedic traditions of India who have influenced the faith of the people over thousands of years. In recent centuries the teachings of Veda Vyasa, Adi Sankara, Madva Acarya, Ramanuja Acarya, Sri Caitanya to name but a few.

Key books and texts

The four *Vedas* (the *Rig*, *Sama*, *Yajur* and *Atharva*), the *Upanishads*, the *Sutras* and *Puranas* as well as the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* which includes the *Bhagavad Gita*. The many writings and commentaries of the *Acharyas* (enlightened teachers) should also be included in the Vedic works and are thus considered ‘Vedic’ in a practical sense.

Prophets

There are many, many prophets and enlightened teachers over the thousands of years of Vedic culture.

Final prophets

To this very day, there are spiritually advanced Gurus presenting the Vedic teachings in the various traditions that make up the Vedic culture.

After the final prophets?

In Hinduism there are always self-realized teachers and prophets coming to enlighten humanity.

About Jesus

With his emphasis on love and his disregard for social stratification, Jesus preached a doctrine similar to that of the *Bhakti* movements of India. *Hindus see Jesus as a pure spiritual teacher.*

Holy land(s) / places

For the followers of the Vedic Culture, known as *Sanatana Dharma*, there are thousands of places of pilgrimage throughout India. In fact the whole of India is known as the sacred *Bharata Varsha* or sacred land.

Pilgrimage

Some of the principle places of pilgrimage devotees of the Vedic culture would frequent in their lives may be: *Gangotri* (source of the sacred river Ganges), *Kedanath*, (holy city where a form of Lord Shiva is venerated), *Allahabad* (confluence of three sacred rivers and the site of the Holy Kumbh mela), *Varanasi* (the holy city where it is believed that bathing in the Ganges river there cleanses one of all sinful acts of the past.), *Vrindavan* (birth place of Lord Krishna the speaker of *Bhagavad Gita*), to name but a few.

Legal system

Traditionally accepted as one of the supplementary arms of the Vedas, *The Laws of Manu* or *'Manava Dharma Shastra'* is one of the standard books in the Hindu canon and a basic text for all gurus to base their teachings on. This 'revealed scripture' comprises 2684 verses, divided into twelve chapters presenting the norms of domestic, social, and religious life in India under the Brahmin influence, and is fundamental to the understanding of ancient Indian society.

CURRENT DATA**How many in Australia? (approx)**

Australia has about 200,000 Hindus.

How many worldwide?

In the world there are 900 million Hindus

BELIEFS**Revelation?**

While Hinduism is multifaceted rather than monolithic, its basic tenets are respect for God, humanity, and salvation. The Hindu Scriptures (*Vedas* and *Upanishads*) teach the goal of humanity as liberation from an endless cycle of death and

reincarnation (*samsara*). Liberation (*moksha*) from *samsara* is attained when we realize that our individual selves are an illusion and that we are not these bodies but spirit souls trapped in this mortal temporary existence. Until such enlightenment is achieved, the law of *karma* dictates that our deeds in previous lives determine how we are reborn in our next life.

Day of judgement?

Hindus have a cyclic understanding of external history/internal spirituality. The Cycle or *Kalpa* lasts 8.64 billion years in the terms of orthodox Hindus. There are four *yugas* or ages in this process from completely pure to completely impure. The final is *Kali Yuga* or the Dark Age where civilization becomes spiritually degraded, human lives are shortened by violence and disease and there is a general state of decay in nature. This is the worst period before complete destruction which is then followed by a Golden Age. Thus whenever there is intolerable evil and chaos in the world, there is an appearance of an *Avatara*. In the current Age, the Lord shall manifest Himself as the *Kalki Avatara*, who will establish righteousness upon the earth and the minds of the people will become as pure as crystal. *In Hinduism, there is no eternal damnation of souls or end times.*

Life after death?

All beings are born and in time, all die. According to the Vedic Scriptures all beings are then born again. Hindus believe that the soul *Reincarnates*, evolving through many births until all *karmas* (for every action there is a reaction) have been resolved, and Self-realization is attained thus giving liberation from the cycle of rebirth. Not a single soul will be eternally deprived of this destiny.

Heaven

In the Vedic Scriptures many heavenly realms are described and according to one's desire one can attain a particular heavenly destination if the proper pious activities have been performed in the individual's life, but a true seeker of Self-Realization is not interested in a heavenly destination as that is still viewed as a material realm, a true *Yogi* (one whose only desire is to attain union with God) will strive for this alone.

Hell

The student of the *Vedas* understands that there are varying degrees of Heavenly realms and Hellish realms and according to one's desires and Karma one will go to a specific destination. For a Hindu to take birth again in an animal body, due to sinful activity in life or performing bad karma, is the most hellish destination as one loses one's free will and has to wait virtually endlessly until another human birth. But any Hellish predicament an individual may find oneself in is never an eternal one.

Messiah

Hindus do not believe in a single Messiah, but do believe that the Supreme Lord personally descends from His Supreme abode from age to age or sends His pure messenger to guide mankind spiritually.

Time

In contrast to the Western concept of linear time, the sacred texts of India view reality from the perspective of cycles called *Yugas*. Our current cycle of history is seen as one of many stages that recur eternally. Ages turn into new ages, and then back again. Nature shows hints of this throughout life: the seasons repeat themselves, the days of the week recur, days turn into night and then day again.

One all-powerful God

Hindus may believe in a one, all pervasive Supreme Being the Personality of Godhead who is the embodiment of truth, consciousness and joy, who is beginningless, the origin of everything, the cause of all causes or an immanent transcendental consciousness worshipped in many different guises (pantheistic), or also as only one of many Gods (polytheistic).

One all knowing God

According to the Hindu Personalist, the Supreme Lord is all knowing.

Do you have to believe in God

Using the overarching term “Hinduism” for the many forms of beliefs practiced in India is comparable to ignoring the different religious orientations within each of the Western traditions, arbitrarily merging them under a single banner. So some followers of the Vedic texts believe in a personal God, others do not.

COMMUNICATING WITH GOD

Most common Names of God

The Vedic Scriptures reveal thousands and thousands of names for God .

Prayer

All Hindus pray and meditate daily, some will chant the *Gayatri* prayer or Invocation to God three times a day, morning, midday and evening.

Where?

A Hindu may pray in at the Temple or in their home, as most will have a shrine or altar.

Language of Prayer

The sacred and ancient language of Sanskrit is the language most prayers, *bhajans* (sacred songs) or chants are recited in.

Singing and music

Hindus are known for their singing of devotionals songs. *Kirtan* is the loud chanting accompanied by musical instruments, *Sankirtan* is congregational chanting. When perfected the chanting leads to awareness of God's absolute nature, ie., that there is no difference between the *nami* (the named one) and the *nama* (the name).

Prayer direction

Generally facing the rising sun

Prayer clothing

For Hindu clothing is viewed as an important marker of social classification. For prayer in general, the traditional dress for both men and women consists of various cloths elegantly draped over the body and held together by folds and tucks. How the clothing is put on will reveal whether a man is a *sannyasi* renunciant, a *brahmachari* celibate student, or a *grihasta* a householder.

CALENDAR

Day starts

For the follower of the Vedic tradition one starts their spiritual practice very early in the morning at a time call the *Brahma muhurtah* which is astrologically the best time for prayer and meditation.

Calendar type

Hindus also use a lunar calendar.

Main festivals and Holy days of the year

Local festivals and Temple festivities take place throughout the year according to region. The following is a list of twelve main festivals along with their corresponding deities and any related stories.

Festival	Month	Deity	Related Stories
Sarasvati Puja	January	Sarasvati	Saraswati curses Brahma
Maha Shiva Ratri	Feb/March	Shiva	Stories of Shiva
Holi	March	Vishnu (Narasimha)	Prahlad and Narasimha (and Holika)
Rama Navami	Mar/April	Rama	Ramayana, especially Rama's birth
Hanuman Jayanti	April	Hanuman	Ramayana, especially
Ratha Yatra	June/July	Jagannatha	The proud merchant
Janmashtami	Aug/Sept	Krishna	Krishna's birth and childhood
Ganesh Chaturthi	Aug/Sept	Ganesh	How Ganesh received his head
Navaratri/Durga Puja	Sept/Oct	Shakti, Parvati	Durga kills Mahisha, and others
Dussehra	October	Rama	Ramayana

RELIGIOUS INSTITUTIONS

Community Centre

The Temple or *Mandir* is the place of worship for a Hindu.

In the Community Centre

A Hindu temple or *Devalayam* or *Mandir* is a place of worship for followers of the Vedas. A picture of most temples is the presence of *Murtis* (images) of the Deity to whom the temple is dedicated. They are usually dedicated to one primary deity, the presiding deity, and other subordinate deities associated with the main deity. However, some temples are dedicated to several deities, and some have symbols instead of a *murti*. Many temples are located in key geographical points, such as a hill top, near waterfalls, caves and rivers.

School

Most Hindu children now attend either public or private schools and the Vedic scriptures are taught at Sunday schools around Australia. The ancient *Gurukul* is a type of Vedic school in India in which students go to the house of their teacher, or the guru, to live and study under his care. The students are all treated the same no matter what their social castes are or how elevated in society his family is. This system of education is the oldest on earth for it has existed since the dawn of Vedic civilization. According to modern chronology its roots can be traced back 10,000 years to the time of the ancient civilization. The curriculum ensures the development of the physical, mental and spiritual conditions of the student.

At the *Gurukul*, the student learns about self-development in all possible areas that he will go through different stages of life, such as householder life, professional life, etc. What is astonishing is that students also learn about ecology and world preservation for they become fully aware of self-sufficiency, farming and cow protection.

Cemetery

While most Hindu will be cremated, *Antyesti* or Hindu funeral rites, is an important Sanskara, sacrament of Hindu society. Extensive texts of such rites are available, particularly in the *Garuda Purana*. There is wide inconsistency in theory and practice, and the procedures differ from place to place. Further, these rites also differ depending on the caste, jāti, social group, and the status of the deceased person.

Home

The family home is of great importance for the Hindu as a place of hospitality and service. Many Hindu homes have a personal shrine set aside somewhere in the house that include pictures or *murtis* of various deities. A daily *puja* is often dedicated to the family deities (*kuladevata*) and personal deities (*ishta-devata*). A daily *puja* usually consists of a simple worship of offerings, such as an offering of

light, water and incense, and/or fruit. Usually with a small *aarti* (lamp ritual) afterwards. *Puja* can be performed with any available offerings.

Religious leaders

There are many titles in the Hindu religion. The ancient monastic order of Hinduism consists of members called *Swami's* which refer to those monks who have renounced inwardly ego-consciousness and worldliness for the superior treasure of God-realization and spirituality.

Mahatama is an honorific title to a great individual such as Mahatma Gandhi and means 'Great Soul'. *Mahasaya* is a religious Sanskrit title meaning 'great teacher' like *Guru* and *Satguru*. There is *Maharishi* which means 'great seer'. These and many more can all refer to spiritual leaders in one way or another.

Community Leaders

Within local temples there would be the Temple President and a management team of both the monastic, Brahmin Priests and lay men and women who contribute to the running of the Temple as well counseling and directing the local community.

Membership

Hinduism is open to all people. Yes anyone can, if they really want to be. But you are not compelled to worship god or to do any other things. That is the main difference from other religions. Hinduism is not a religion as such. It is a way of life.

KEY VALUES

The core values of a Hindu following *Sanatana Dharma* (Vedic Life) are as follows and encompass honesty, integrity, helping others, justice, peace, hospitality and fasting.

The sanctity of life;

Issues regarding one's true identity. Prejudice and negative discrimination.

Reincarnation & Samsara;

Compassion for others; the nature of suffering; attitudes towards wildlife. Abortion.

Karma

Personal responsibility and accountability; foreseeing the consequences.

Prakriti and Guna

Model for analysing/categorising behaviour; goodness considered basis of ideal character; sustainability relates to ecological/economic issues.

Maya

Self-deception and mistaken notions; honesty with oneself and others.

Liberation

Purpose of life; without mind and sense control, no real morality.

God

Service. Attitudes towards God, authority figures. Proprietorship.

Dharma

Rights and responsibilities; common values and the notion of different values.
Family issues. Equality and diversity. Material sense of identity and belonging.
Sexual morality. Protection of dependants.

One goal/many paths

Inclusion; acknowledging people for what they are, not what they should be; unity in diversity.

Guru and Scripture

Sources of knowledge; authority (especially notions of natural, well-wishing elders); appropriate respect for authority; discernment.

LIFE CYCLE

Birth related rituals

The birth ritual or *Samskara* begins before the birth of the child. *Garbhadhan*, meaning conception, should be performed before conception. Different scriptures prescribe different rituals and also different times when the *garbhadhan samskara* is to be performed. The underlying importance is two-fold. According to Hindu belief, the creation of a new life should be done in accordance with the scriptures. The parents should realize that bringing a child into this world is an act of responsibility.

The *Jatakarma samskara* is performed at the birth of the child. The first important sacrament after birth is the *namakaran samskara* or christening. After the religious rituals are over the child's horoscope is written and blessed by the presiding deity.

Adolescence

In ancient times the *Upanayana Samskara* was one of the most important religious rituals. When the youth began his study of the Vedas he was given a sacred thread to wear. This investiture classified him as a "twice born" because the commencement of the Vedic education was likened to a second birth.

Marriage

After the completion of the Vedic education most students return home to pursue their vocations and get married and lead a family life. The “graduation” ceremony that propels the student from Brahmacharya Ashram to Grahasta Ashram is known as *Samavartana Samskara*.

If one ritual has to be identified as the most important of all the *Shodasha Samskara* then it has to be the wedding ceremony or *Vivaha*. The wedding ceremony has become a mix of a cultural and a religious ceremony and is performed differently by different Hindu communities.

Divorce

Generally speaking divorce is just simply not covered by the Hindu sacred texts. Marriage is, after all, celestial concordance between the man and the woman. In Hindu society, marriage is not just given lip service as a covenant; it is worshipped as such. Sexuality, it must be noted, is given a vital and significant part to play in marriages that are infused with such sacramental importance. Because of this, an incompatibility is certainly not reason enough to justify the surrender of the marriage vows. Marriage is seen as a responsibility with one of the requirements being a predetermined recognition of the sacrament as part of the Hindu precept of *dharma* religious duty.

Death

There is one thing that is certain in this lifetime: eventually we all must die. A belief in the cyclical reincarnation of the soul is one of the foundations of the Hindu religion. Death is viewed as a natural aspect of life, and there are numerous epic tales, sacred scriptures, and vedic guidance that describe the reason for death's existence, the rituals that should be performed surrounding it, and the many possible destinations of the soul after departure from its earthly existence. While the ultimate goal is to transcend the need to return to life on earth, all Hindus believe they will be reborn into a future that is based primarily on their past thoughts and actions.

Cremation is a ritual designed to do much more than dispose of the body; it is intended to release the soul from its earthly existence. "Hindus believe that cremation (compared to burial or outside disintegration) is most spiritually beneficial to the departed soul." This is based on the belief that the "astral body" will linger "as long as the physical body remains visible." If the body is not cremated, "the soul remains nearby for days or months"

The standard cremation ceremony begins with the ritual cleansing, dressing and adorning of the body. The body is then carried to the cremation ground as prayers are chanted .

COMMON OBSERVANCES

Food

Hinduism places such great emphasis on the role of food that it has been called "the kitchen religion." No religious or public function is complete without the distribution of food, especially *prasada* (food offered to God).

There are many complex rules regarding the preparation and consumption of food. Vaishnavism has developed a sophisticated theology, which classifies all eatables according to the three *gunas*. Meat is usually shunned as it is considered *tamasic*, influenced by darkness. Shaivites observe fewer dietary restrictions and Shaktas are usually inclined towards meat, traditionally obtained from animal sacrifice. Although some Hindus eat meat, almost all avoid beef out of respect for the cow

Food plays an important role in worship, and the food offered to the deities (*prasada*) is thought to bestow considerable religious merit, purifying body, mind and spirit. There is widespread belief that the consciousness of the cook enters the food and influences the mind of the eater. Taking *prasada* that has been cooked and offered with devotion inclines the mind towards spirituality.

The *prasada* that has been on the altar is especially sacred, and is handed out to worshippers, either by the priest at the shrine or as worshippers leave the *mandir*. *Prasad* is also served in the form of a full meal, especially on festival days. Many Hindus have an altar at home and offer their food before eating

Clothing

The colour of one's clothing is a clear indicator of social status. *Sannyasis* and *brahmacaris* wear saffron clothing(representing celibacy)whereas householders (married men) where white. White is also the colour of dress for women who are widows, in contrast to the bright colours and patterns of married women's saris.

Hair

Traditionally, hair styles and bodily markings are employed as indicators of religious affiliations. Vaisnava Hindu priests and monks generally have shaven heads keeping only a small tuft of hair on the back of the head. This distinguishes them from followers of Shankara whose heads are completely shaven. Ladies generally grow their hair and part their hair down the middle as well as plating their hair. In everyday modern life not much emphasis is placed on these traditions, the only stipulation that is required is that the hair clean and neat.

Special day of the week

The week is divided into seven days, each corresponding to one of seven planets, exactly as in the West. No day is particularly special but each is related to a specific deity. For example, Monday is often associated with Shiva and Tuesday with Hanuman. Hindus may perform fasts and recite prayers to supplicate a particular deity on the corresponding day of the week.

Other prohibitions

The following are twelve of the most important qualities listed in scripture. Naturally this list, and the priority given to each virtue, will vary from one tradition to another.

- *Ahimsa* (non-violence) – based on the concepts of atman and reincarnation.
- Mind and sense control – considered essential for any form of morality.
- Tolerance – necessary in order to deal with inconveniences in the performance of one's *dharma*.
- Hospitality – demonstrating magnanimity, and the value of service (*seva*).
- Compassion – based on notions of *atman*, and the ability to feel for others as we feel for ourselves.
- Protection – an essential duty is to give shelter to others, especially those less fortunate.
- Respect – for all living beings and for the sanctity of all life.
- Wisdom – knowledge is contrasted with ignorance, the Hindu equivalent of the "good -evil" paradigm.
- Austerity – essential to gain wisdom in addition to mere theoretical knowledge.
- Celibacy – important for spiritual life. Only one of the four *ashrams* is permitted sexual gratification.
- Honesty – essential to build legitimate trust within relationships and to avoid self-deception.
- Cleanliness – includes external hygiene and inner purity; essential for Brahmins.

SIKHISM

ORIGINS

What does the name mean?

Sikh means a learner, a seeker of Truth. A Sikh learns from his Guru Masters the way to find union with God.

Where do we trace our faith back to?

Sikhs trace their faith to Guru Nanak who was born in 1469 at Nankana Sahib near Lahore in Punjab, now in Pakistan.

Key people ?

Sikhs have ten Gurus from 1469 – 1708. They are Guru Nanak Dev; Guru Angad Dev; Guru Amardas; Guru Ram Das; Guru Arjan Dev; Guru Hargobind; Guru Harkrishan; Guru Har Rai; Guru Tegh Bahadur; and Guru Gobind Singh.

Key books & texts

Sikh Holy Scripture is Sri Guru Granth Sahib. It is also the eternal Guru of the Sikhs; a unique phenomena, where ‘Word’ is the Guru.

Prophets

The Sikh Gurus listed above.

Final prophet

The Sikh Holy Scripture, Sri Guru Granth Sahib is the eternal Guru of the Sikhs.

Holy places

The Earth is the temple of God. *“Where ever my True Guru goes and sits that place is beautiful, O Lord King.” (p.450)*

Pilgrimage

Pilgrimage has no significance in Sikhism. But Sikhs visit places associated with the lives of the Sikh Gurus and other significant places to learn about their history and heritage.

Legal System

Sikhs are guided by the values and ethics as contained in Sri Guru Granth Sahib the Sikh Holy Scripture. Initiated Sikhs comply with a Code of Ethics enshrined in the Sikh ‘Rehat Maryada.’

CURRENT DATA

How many in Australia?

There are 27, 000 Sikhs in Australia

How many in worldwide?

There are 25 million Sikhs in the world.

BELIEFS

Revelation

Gurbani – Guru’s ‘Word’. Sri Guru Granth Sahib contains the Guru’s ‘Word’. It is the revelation. God revealed Himself through the Gurus. Sri Guru Granth Sahib was compiled by Guru Arjan the fifth Sikh Guru and contains the compositions of Sikh Gurus as well as saints of other religious traditions.

Day of Judgement ?

All have to render an account of their lives. Guru Nanak says “*According to one’s actions, one gets near or distant from God.*”(p.8) The Guru affirms that judgment on man’s actions determine the next birth or form for the individual’s soul. The best action in the world is to meditate on ‘The Name’ This alone can earn salvation. With God’s Grace no account is necessary.

Life after Death

Life on earth is temporary. The soul lives on. A devotee has no fear of death. He welcomes death because it gives an opportunity for merger into divinity. Kabir whose compositions are in Sri Guru Granth Sahib says “*the world is afraid of death- that fills my mind with bliss. It is only by death that perfect supreme bliss is obtained.*” (p. 1365) and Nanak says: “*As waves of water merge again with water, so does my light merge into light.*” (p 102)

Heaven

Heaven is where there is ‘*Kirtan*’ singing of God’s praises. Sikhism does not regard the winning of a place in heaven as a worthy object. The devotee is neither afraid of hell nor anxious to go to heaven. A virtuous person is happy and contented as if he is living in heaven.

Hell

Hell and heaven refers to evil or good stages of life respectively. “*What is hell, what is heaven? The devotees reject them both. I have no obligation to either of them, by the Grace of my Guru.*” (P. 969)

Messiah

Guided by Sikh Gurus your destiny is in your own hands.

All powerful God ?

God is the Cause of all Causes. He is the only Doer.

One all-knowing God

God is omniscient. God is the inner knower.

Do you have to believe in God?

Yes, absolute faith and trust in God.

Most common names for God

God has many names and no name. God can simply be referred to as 'Oh.' Sikhs refer to God as '*Waheguru*' Wonderful Lord. The names of God as used by other religious traditions are acceptable to Sikhs and are included in Sri Guru Granth Sahib.

Prayer

There are three daily prayer times (i) in the early hours before sunrise; (ii) at sunset; and (iii) at bed time. Sikhs remember God at all times. Sikhs pray daily for the well-being of the whole of humanity- "*Sarbat Da Bhalla*".

Where?

Sikhs can pray anywhere; at home, at work, in open spaces, or at the Gurdwara with the congregation of the holy.

Language of prayer

It is usual to read prayers from Guru Granth Sahib which is in *Gurmukhi*. Prayer in any language is accepted by God.

Singing and Music.

'*Kirtan*,' singing holy hymns to the accompaniment of music is a predominant form of Sikh worship. Guru Nanak himself sang the revelations of God to the accompaniment of the Rabeck.

Prayer direction

Sikhs can pray in all directions.

Prayer clothing

There are no rules for clothing except that one's head must be covered during prayer. Male Sikhs wear a turban or a '*patka*' at all times and females wear '*dupatta*' (a scarf)

CALENDAR

Day starts

According to the hour at sunrise

Calendar type

Solar calendar with lunar impact. Sikhs have the *Nanakshahi* Calendar which is solar. All '*Gurpurabs*' (days associated with the lives of the Gurus) are celebrated according to the *Nanakshahi* calendar. However Guru Nanak's birthday is celebrated on the basis of the lunar calendar.

Main Festival/ Holy Days of the year

The main festivals celebrated by Sikhs are:

- Birthday of Guru Nanak, the founder of the Sikh faith.
- Birth of Guru Gobind Singh, the tenth Guru of the Sikhs. His birthday falls on the 5th of January.
- Guru Arjan Dev's martyrdom. Guru Arjan is the fifth Guru of the Sikhs. The Martyrdom anniversary usually celebrated on 16th June is not an occasion for sorrow but for inspiration and exaltation to remind Sikhs of the heroic deeds and the good work done by the Gurus.
- Guru Tegh Bahadur's martyrdom: the ninth Guru of the Sikhs. He was martyred in 1675 for upholding the rights of the oppressed, fought for their rights to practice religious freedom. His martyrdom anniversary falls on 24th November.
- Conferment of Guruship to Sri Guru Granth Sahib. Guru Gobind Singh ordained Guru Granth Sahib as the eternal Guru of the Sikhs in 1708. This day falls on 20th October each year.
- Vaisakhi celebrated on 14th April each year. On this day in 1699 Guru Gobind Singh initiated the first five Sikhs into the Khalsa order. The Khalsa maintain their physical distinctiveness in society by carrying the five articles of faith.

RELIGIOUS INSTITUTIONS

Community Centre

Gurdwara means door to the Guru A Sikh place of enlightenment and service to the Community.

In the Community Centre

The community centre contains a place for prayers, meditation and introspection. It has a prayer hall or *Darbar* Sahib. Central to the prayer hall is the high pedestal where Sri Guru Granth Sahib is placed in full grandeur and majesty. There is a stage for musicians to lead in the singing of *Kirtan* and a separate room for '*Sukh Aasan*' where Sri Guru Granth Sahib is retired overnight.

In addition every Gurdwara has a community kitchen and a dining hall. Here *langar* – a meal is prepared by volunteers and served to all irrespective of their religious beliefs after a Sikh religious service.

School

The Gurdwara will have a library and class rooms. Punjabi language schools are held in the Gurdwara, where religion, language, and Sikh religious music are taught.

Cemetery

Sikhs cremate their dead. So they need and use a crematorium which should be accessible.

Home

Home is the centre of Sikh learning and practice. Sikhs are expected to marry and raise a family. Parents are expected to bring up their children in the Sikh way of life. The family prays together. A room may be reserved for prayer with Sri Guru Granth Sahib kept as in the Gurdwara. Visitors are welcome with a great deal of hospitality.

Religious leaders

There is no professional priesthood among the Sikhs. In Sikh Gurdwaras any one (male or female irrespective of age) can lead in prayer services i.e. reading Sri Guru Granth Sahib or performing '*kirtan*' (hymn singing). The person known as a *granthi* is merely a reader of Sri Guru Granth Sahib. The *raagis* (professionally trained musicians) can perform *kirtan*. But neither the *granthi* nor *raagis* are priests, because there is no such office.

Community leaders

Any male or female can be a community leader. Each Gurdwara is managed through an incorporated organization. A committee is elected from among its members to manage its affairs. There are community leaders who manage educational, welfare, social, cultural, or sporting organizations.

Membership

Gurdwaras belong to all Sikhs. Membership is not required. It is only to comply with legal requirements that an organization is incorporated to manage the Gurdwara. Memberships exist because of this. This is sometimes an issue because in terms of religious practice the entire '*sangat*' congregation (members and non-members) have equal say in the Gurdwara.

KEY VALUES

Honesty and integrity

In Sikhism truth is the highest ethical value. God is 'True'. We have to live truthfully. Guru Nanak said '*Truth is high but higher still is truthful living*'.

A Sikh is expected to earn his livelihood by honest work, and share the fruits of his labor with others.

Helping others

Sikhs believe in service to humanity through the concept of ‘*seva*,’ without the expectation of a reward. Guru Nanak says “*in the midst of the world do seva, and you shall be given a place of honor in the Court of the Lord.*” (p26)

Justice

A Sikh should be just in his dealings with others, dispense full justice when in authority, and fight for justice to the oppressed, the downtrodden and the weak. For this he must be spiritually inspired.

Peace

Sikhs believe that peace can be attained by living in God’s Will and respecting the rights of others.

Fasting

Sikhism encourages temperance and moderation in matters of food. For Sikhs fasting has no religious merit. Fasting for reasons of health is understandable

LIFE CYCLE

Birth-related rituals

There are two spiritual ceremonies:

(i) Initiation of the child into the Sikh fold. A *granthi* or a senior member of the community will have some water and sugar in a caste iron bowl. He will stir this with a *khanda* (a double –edged sword) while reciting prayers. After a supplication seeking God’s blessing for a long and healthy life for the child this mixture is sprinkled on to child’s face and some drops are put into the mouth.

(ii) A naming ceremony is held at the Gurdwara. A random reading of the Sri Guru Granth Sahib is made and the first letter of the first word of the reading becomes the initial letter of the child’s name. The suffix ‘Singh’ is added to the name of a boy and ‘Kaur’ is added for a girl.

Adolescence

There are no specific rituals required. However the adolescent or an adult may decide to take ‘*Khande di Pahul or Amrit.*’ This is voluntary initiation into the Sikh fold. The person has now made a commitment to live a spiritual life. The person is bound by a strict religious code conduct and is required to maintain the five articles of faith. (*kesh*) long hair; *kanga* (comb); *kachhera* Undergarment); *kara* (iron bangle); *Kirpan* (A ceremonial sword).

Marriage

Marriage is a union of two souls. It attaches great importance to a householder’s life. A marriage ceremony is referred to as *Anand Karaj* a ceremony of bliss and is performed in the presence of Guru Granth Sahib and the congregation. Prescribed hymns (*lavan*) are sung, and circumambulation of Guru Granth Sahib

is done by the couple four times. Thereafter, a congregational prayer is held. Monogamy is practiced by Sikhs.

Divorce

For Sikhs *Anand Karaj* marriage ceremony is a sacrament and not a civil contract. There is no religious ceremony for divorce. So divorce may only take place under civil code. A second marriage after divorce is permissible.

Death

Death is seen as an opportunity to merge with God.

The dead body is given a wash and dressed in new clothes. It is then cremated. At the time of cremation sacred Hymns are recited and a congregational prayer is done for the departed soul. The soul being a part of ultimate reality lives on.

COMMON OBSERVANCES

Food

There is a general directive of Guru Nanak '*do not take food that affects health; causes pain or suffering to the body or produces evil thoughts in the mind.*' (GGS .p16)

The Gurus did not advocate the eating of meat or banned its use. Sikhs are forbidden from eating meat prepared according to other religious rites e.g. halal or kosher. By tradition meat is never served in the *Guru Ka Langar* community kitchen.

The use of tobacco in any form is forbidden. The use of intoxicants of any kind including alcohol is not permitted.

Clothing

A Sikh is guided by personal comfort and modesty for choice of dress. There is no religious restriction or requirement as to dress except that he must wear a *Kachhera*, and a turban. A Sikh woman may or may not tie a turban.

Hair

For a Sikh to keep unshorn hair is to live according to God's Will. A devout Sikh therefore does not cut his hair. The hair is tied in a knot above the head and crowned with a turban. Similarly for a child male or female the hair is not cut. It is a religious requirement. The Sikh Code of Conduct says: "*A Sikh should, in no way, harbour any antipathy to the hair of the head with which the child is born. He should not temper with the hair with which the child is born.*"

Special day of the week

For Sikhs all days and times are special in remembering God. Any day is convenient for Sikhs to gather at the Gurdwara. In Australia they get together on Sundays. In some other countries they may get together on Fridays.

Other prohibitions

Sikhs are to live a moral and ethical life. Therefore their actions by word, thought, or deed should not harm themselves or others. Prohibitions therefore relate to maintaining good behavior. Examples are: do not steal; do not gamble; do not commit adultery; do not kill; and do not slander.

Instead of prohibitions one has to follow some positive directions; such as compassion for example, a poor person's mouth is the Guru's cash offerings box.

(Note: All quotations are from Sri Guru Granth Sahib- the Sikh Holy Scripture).