

Elmbridge Multi-faith Forum

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INSIGHTS INTO FAITHS

Volume 1

Faiths of 'Indian' and Persian Origin

Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism,
Sikhism, Zoroastranism

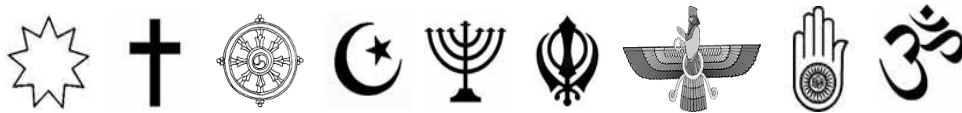
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INTRODUCTION

The contents of this briefing are based on information given to members of the Elmbridge Multifaith Forum during meetings and visits to 'Faith Centres'. Reports on these visits were referred back to our hosts for checking. The source of the information is given at the beginning of each article.

Our aim is not so much to provide an authoritative or comprehensive description of the faiths included, as to offer an understanding of them which we have found helpful and which we are passing on in the hope that others will also find them helpful.

In later volumes we shall be looking at other faiths, notably the Ibrahimic Faiths.



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1 HINDUISM

Sources: Our 'insights' into Hinduism are based on an 'Aspects of Hinduism' evening addressed by Ms Anjali Paul and Mr Himanishu Joshi (6 December, 2007) and a visit to the Shri Swaminarayam Mandir (Temple) at Neasden (11 November, 2006).



a) *Hinduism*

Hinduism is one of the earliest religions, its origins dating back to the late Neolithic or early 'Harapan' age (5500-2600BCE). The 'Historic Vedic Religion' appears in about 1500-500BCE.

Hinduism originated in the Indus Valley in the 'Sind' area of N.W. India (now Pakistan) and claims to be the most tolerant, most resilient and most peace-loving of all religions. There was no founder, but wise men of the time claimed to achieve the ultimate experience of God through prayers and meditation.

A sophisticated civilisation existed in India as long as 5,000BC, with villages comprising mud-brick houses, later developing into towns of up to 25,000 inhabitants with citadels and defensive walls enclosing dwellings with courtyards, rooms and compartments, bathrooms and sewerage systems.

In its purest form Hinduism is described as the Sanātana Dharma, the 'Eternal law' or 'Eternal faith'. It has no single founder, although the inspiration and knowledge of the *Bhagwad-gītā*, and its larger epic known as the *Mahābhārata* are attributed to *Krishna*.

Scripture

The *Dharma* or *Dharmasya* can be translated as the 'path of Devotional Service'. It is essentially the sacred or spiritual 'law' that governs the universe as well as the religious and the moral law that Krishna and later Buddha urged people to abide by.

There is no single founder or scripture to define Hinduism but a massive volume of literature, 'The Vedas', mainly written in Sanskrit. Additions were made over the years by various scholars. There are 216 'Commandments' as compared with the 'Ten Commandments' given to Moses. There are the

Śruti (Shruti) the philosophical canon of Sacred Texts and *Smiriti*, the remembered historical, social, ethical and philosophical narrative developed over millennia. Thus we have:

THE BHAGWAD-GĪTĀ (*Song of God*): This is the 'Executive Summary' of Hinduism, and the key teaching in it is **Renunciation**, i.e. the sacrifice of worldly desires to make way for spiritual progress, which, in turn, paves the way to enlightenment. It describes a dialogue between Krishna and Arjuna, his chariot driver. It takes place just before a battle which is troubling Arjuna, as he is likely to injure or kill many of his own family. The dialogue is a verbal endeavour to identify the meaning of existence, the nature of divine reality and the different ways to attain the highest spiritual goal.

While the authorship is not identified for certain, it is generally accepted that the inspiration and knowledge it contains is attributed to Krishna, who is said to be a manifestation in human form, or incarnation, of the Supreme Brahman, God.

The text of the Bhagavad-gītā is essentially in the form of a dialogue between a warrior named Arjuna and the Lord Krishna, who in this instant manifested Himself as Arjuna's chariot rider. The setting is an open plain on the eve of the great battle between the Pāṇḍavas and their cousins the Kauravas. This may have been a true historical event around 1000 BCE. The warrior, Arjuna, is torn between fighting for a cause he regards as just, and the knowledge that he will have to fight many of his own family and relations who are on the other side. Troubled by this conflict he turns to his friend Krishna for advice. What follows is Krishna's explanation of existence, the nature of divine reality, and the different ways to attain the highest spiritual goal.

Some interpreters have regarded the battle to be a metaphor for the battle between the forces of good and evil within us, the struggle for the spiritual enlightenment and salvation. Arjuna's relatives represent our attachment to this world and the battle is the necessary struggle we must wage against these attachments in order to attain spiritual self-mastery.

The important chapters are 9 and 10, mid-way through the work, where we find the text expounding on the central goal of spiritual life - attainment to the divine reality - which is here indicated as related to the person of Krishna. But Krishna informs Arjuna that to offer this grace to humankind, He has, out of His compassion appeared in every age:

For protection of the good,
And the destruction of evil-doers,
To make firm footing for the right,
I come into being in age after age (4:8)

Krishna also delineates the different ways people have worshipped God, but eventually sets forth the path of devotion to Him (Bhakti) as the supreme way to attain to the divine Presence. This is essentially the mystical path of the love of God.

BRAHMAN: The ultimate belief is in Brahman; the 'Divine Consciousness' that is formed and formless (like ice and water). It is the love of the devotee that freezes the formless God into the form that the devotee chooses. Arjuna said: "You are the Supreme Brahman, the Ultimate, the Supreme Abode and Purifier, The Absolute Truth and the Eternal Divine Person. You are the Primal God, transcendental and original, and You are the unborn and all-pervading beauty". God is male and female, and manifests Him/Herself in all forms, living and non-living.

That same god fulfils three roles, named the **Trimurti: Brahma** (the Creator), **Vishnu** (the Preserver) and **Shiva** (the Destroyer or Transformer), thus each possessing different attributes. Other reincarnations of God include **Krishna, Rama & Buddha**.

Major beliefs of Hinduism come under 9 headings:

Parabrahman: There is one supreme all-powerful God. He is the creator, has a divine form, is imminent, transcendent and the Giver of Moksha.

Avatarvad: 'The Manifestation of God on Earth.' God himself incarnates on earth in various forms to revive Dharma and grant liberation.

Karmavad: The soul reaps fruits, good or bad, according to its past and present actions, which are experienced either in this life or future lives.

Punarjama: Reincarnation. The immortal soul is continuously born and reborn in one of 8,400,000 species until it attains liberation.

Moksha: The liberation of the soul from the cycle of births and deaths, to remain eternally in the service of God.

Guru-Shishya Sambandh: Master-Disciple Relationship. Guidance and grace of a spiritually perfect master, revered as the embodiment of God, is essential for the aspirant seeking liberation.

Dharma: That which sustains the universe. An all encompassing term representing: divine law, law of being, path of righteousness, religion, duty, responsibility, virtue, goodness and truth.

Ved Pramana: Scriptural authority of the Vedas. All Hindu faiths are based on the teachings of the Vedas.

Murt-Puja: Image worship. Consecrated images represent the presence of God which is worshipped. The image is a medium to help devotees offer their devotion to God.

At present Hindus comprise 13.7% (765,351,710) of the world's population, residing in 150 countries.

The word 'Guru' is a dual word: 'Gu' meaning darkness, and 'Ru' meaning taking away. Thus, the Guru is the authoritative medium through whom the person is taken away from darkness and into light. Every Hindu has the right to follow his preferred 'Guru'. Hindus are non-violent and vegetarian so as to cause no harm.

A lovely mantra states: *'In the joy of others lies our joy. In the progress of others lies our progress. In the good of others lies our good.'*

Yoga

Yoga has a central place in Hinduism, and has been defined as 'Technologies or disciplines of ascetism and meditation which are thought to lead to spiritual experience and profound understanding or insight into the nature of existence'.

Role and Types of Yoga

Karma : This is the yoga of action, leading to detachment, reducing the ego, purifying the mind, and identifying with our inner self or Atman. This leads to spiritual rewards in this life and a higher rebirth in the next.

Jnana : Application of an intellectual exercise in purifying the vision through study and learning, constantly reviewing what is real or unreal.

Bhakti : This is the emotional attitude towards devotion and love, using chanting and prayer.

Raja : This is the contemplative approach using self discipline and mediation, striving to attain eight stages of spiritual development (*Samadhi*), or enlightenment. Thus, an individual is able to choose whichever pathway or mechanism suits him in his journey of attainment and understanding.

b) Swaminarayan Hinduism

Hinduism declares that it has a heart as big as the earth – a global heart teaching peace and harmony. In India itself there are 400 regional cultures, 850 dialects thriving in unison and many 'Gurus' each teaching their own form of Hinduism. Hinduism claims to accept all in the concept of the whole world as one family.

All animals are cared for and respected, for Hindus care for all living creatures – 'we all share the same home, our earth'. The Hindu concept of peace extends to all nature and the whole of creation.

The worshippers at the Temple in Neasden are followers of the teachings of a sect founded by *Bhagwan Swaminarayan*, born in 1781 in a village in north India. At the age of 11 he renounced his family and became a yogi or holy man, climbing the Himalayas barefoot and incredibly for three months standing on one leg meditating in snowstorms and severe weather. He performed many miracles, and by 20 years of age had established a spiritual path, initiating 500 monks of his order, building temples, instigating social reforms and creating a code of discipline.

His followers were ascetics but actively practical, wandering from village to village, carrying the message of spiritual purity and also digging wells and setting up alms houses in times of drought and famine.

They were pledged to celibacy, owned nothing, had no attachments whatever, no concerns about food and comfort and subdued the ego in deep humility. Vows enjoined them:

- Do not steal
- Do not eat meat
- Do not drink alcohol
- Do not commit adultery
- Do not indulge in an impure life.

Bhagwan Swaminarayan left a collection of spiritual discourses and a catechism which gave answers to such problems as overcoming depression, how to identify real friends, calming anger, subduing ego and jealousy, developing faith, recognising a true teacher and how to realise God.

His successors have been enlightened Gurus, not elected or selected but divinely revealed. The present head of the faith, now aged 86 - and who happened to be visiting Britain at the time of our visit to Neasden - leads a life of celibacy without personal wealth or comfort. He travels the world helping to inspire people to a better way of living. We were told that he has already counselled 810,000 people personally, read and replied to half a million letters, visited 15,500 villages and sanctified 250,000 homes.

Photographs in the exhibition at Neasden show him with world leaders, including our Royalty, many of whom have been welcomed to the Neasden temple.

He will nominate his successor at his death and will leave a devoted following of more than 5,000 families in more than 30 centres in Britain alone.

Achievement of world peace is the movement's highest aim.

The Building of the Shri Swaminarayan Mandir (Hindu Temple)

In the early 1970s His Holiness Pramukh Swami Maharaj, the spiritual leader of the Swaminarayan Hindu sect came to visit his small but growing group of followers in North London, where they had bought a semi-detached house as a place of worship.

He predicted precisely and accurately that the first traditional Hindu temple or 'Mandir' in Europe, built according to the ancient methods, would be inaugurated in Neasden on 13th August, 1995, and so it was!

It is a masterpiece of exotic architecture and craftsmanship and the largest temple outside India, a stunning complex of towering white marble pinnacles and pillars, rounded domes, intricate carvings, wooden panels, statues, a pillarless prayer hall seating more than 2,000 people, sacred shrines, an exhibition and museum and a video theatre.

Some 5,000 tonnes of Carrara marble and Bulgarian limestone were shipped to India for 1,500 craftsmen to demonstrate their skills, before being transported to Neasden in 26,300 carved pieces. These were assembled like some incredible jigsaw by volunteer workers and the 750 monks – using no metal screws or reinforcing rods, each piece fitting perfectly in place.

In 1992 the concrete foundation of this vast complex was brought to the site by 1,200 Lorries and poured into place in an incredible 24 hours. Within three years the temple was finished and now attracts 500,000 visitors annually.

The courtyards are of Islamic design (Haweli) and the wood came from Burma. The carpets (on which we stood) were manufactured in Ireland and were as good as new after over 10 years of heavy usage.

2 BUDDHISM

a) *Thai Buddhism*

Sources: *The first of the 'insights' into Buddhism is based on visits to the Buddhapadipa Thai Temple, Calonne Road, Wimbledon, where we thank, in particular Brother Phrakru Lom.*

A brief outline of Buddhism

Buddhism derived from Prince Siddhatha Gotama, who lived in the far North of India 2550 years ago in what is now Nepal.



It is he whom we call today 'The Buddha'. He was an extraordinary individual who was possessed by a passionate desire for understanding. His life was initially a comfortable one within the palace where his father, King Suddhodana, tried to shield him from the ugly reality of life. But one day, when he was out of his palace for a short time, he was suddenly confronted with the unpleasant realities of life - people do get old, people do get sick and ultimately die. At about the same time he saw a holy man looking for the truth of life. This fired his spiritual imagination. His determination was to understand life at the fundamental level. At the age of 29 he left home to lead a wandering life. He submitted himself to many famous Indian teachers of that time. He tried various forms of meditation; he also tried a number of ascetic practices. But he realized that none of the practices which he indulged in for 6 years actually brought him to '**Enlightenment**'.

At the age 35 he determined to break through to the reality (to become 'enlightened'). He developed a new form of meditation which he later called 'Insight Meditation'. He seriously concentrated on the 'Three Signs of Being' - the fact that life is impermanent, the fact that life is unsatisfactory, and the fact that there is no unchanging substance in life and in any compounded things. He meditated very deeply at the highest point, and suddenly, when his mind had become correctly attuned to the truth, he did break through to '**Enlightenment**' thus becoming '**The Buddha**'. Henceforth he experienced life in a new way.

His doctrine is mainly based on the '**Four Noble Truths**' - (1) suffering, (2) the cause of suffering, (3) the cessation of suffering, (4) the path leading to the end of suffering. This can be summed up in three 'divisions' (informally known as **3 baskets**): (1) a division of rules; (2) a division of discourses; (3) a division of psychology and philosophy. On the

whole his teaching is that of Peace and Happiness. For family life he recommends five '**Refrains**' (precepts):

Refrain from killing
Refrain from stealing
Refrain from sexual misconduct
Refrain from untruthfulness
Refrain from intoxication

These are the requirements set for ordinary people. But for those who lead a monastic life, there are 227 rules to observe, so that the public pay them heartfelt respect.

The Buddha teaches that human life is subject to suffering in one form or another. The causes of this suffering are essentially 'Hatred, Greed, and Ignorance'. Thus it is we who may hurt ourselves and other people with these attitudes. We can have (inner) peace if we overcome them. Thus we are enjoined to do good and no evil in order to 'clear our mind'. We need to treat the cause of suffering – not the suffering itself.

To clear our mind, we resort to 'meditation', especially while walking, when we can walk in slow deliberate steps thinking and meditating with every movement within each step. Thus we acquire a 'stable mind'. In sitting cross-legged we allow ourselves to concentrate upon 'breathing exercises'. We can, in addition, use flowers to assist meditation provided we are not allergic to pollen. The motto therefore is:

'Do good, do not do evil, in order to clear your mind'

In Buddhism, it is 'the intent' that matters, as well as its implication. Buddhism teaches that life does not end with death. Herein lays the concept of 'Rebirth'. The Buddha did not give detailed teachings but asked people to train their minds. The Buddha is a human being who discovered 'karma' (action) and laid down 'vinaya' (the rules). He pointed out that when we do good we are in 'Heaven', and when we do bad we are in 'Hell' so Heaven and Hell are in the human mind.

In Thailand every man is enjoined to become a 'monk' for at least one month during his lifetime, preferably during his youth but it may even be after retirement. Girls should similarly spend a period as 'nuns'. There are about twenty thousand Thai Buddhist families in the UK.

The Buddhapadipa Temple

History of the Buddhist Thai Temple

To a large extent it was managed in the early stages by His Excellency the Thai Ambassador to London whose name was Prince Plerng Noppadon As

early as 1968 Thai Buddhists started to meet at Haverstock Hill near Wembley Football Stadium. When this eventually proved inconvenient, they moved to East Sheen, Richmond, London, whilst they looked for a permanent site.

In 1975 the then Thai Ambassador, Dr Kon-tee Suppamongkon, found the present site (14 Calonne Road, Wimbledon, London) known as the Barrow Gill House. It had a large plot of land covering four acres and was owned by Mrs Witmore. On behalf of the Thai Government the Ambassador purchased it. On 13th November 1976, all the Thai monks moved from Richmond to settle in Wimbledon

Soon a Thai architect was invited to work out the design for the Shrine Hall (temple). However at that time only British construction firms were allowed actually to do the work, and Norwest Holm Ltd were chosen. The building of the temple in the Thai architectural style cost £600,000, which was, at the time, a large sum of money and when translated into Thai currency was 30M Bahts.

The inauguration was on 30th October 1982 and the ceremony included a "Certification" from His Majesty the King of Thailand authorizing the establishment of a Thai Temple. This was read by His Excellency the Thai Ambassador in public including 126 Buddhist monks. (If the site of the temple had not been purchased by the Thai Government, His Excellency the Thai Ambassador to the United Kingdom would have had to seek Certification from Her Majesty the Queen).

The ceremony included the laying of 8 cornerstones around the temple and one cornerstone in the centre. This was a requirement for the establishment of any Buddhist temple and must be in the presence of at least 50 Buddhist monks, who have to circumambulate each of the 9 stones of the temple. HRH Princess Kalyanivaddhan, a sister of the King of Thailand, HRH Princess Alexandra, the Queen's cousin, the Worshipful Mayor of Merton and many distinguished Buddhists and non-Buddhists were present for the inauguration. The Temple was completed on 31st October 1982. His Majesty the King of Thailand named the temple as 'Buddhapadipa' meaning 'Casting the Light of the Buddha'. The temple site is a seminary and place of worship, which is used also for holding Buddhist festivals and celebrations.

Festivals and Celebrations

The 'Annual Festival' commemorates the day the Buddha gave his First Sermon. It was formerly on the day of the full moon in July. This may or may not be on Sunday. Here in the West it is held on the Sunday nearest to the actual date, but this is just for convenience. In 2007 it fell on 29th July which happened by chance to be a Sunday.

Other days of celebration are: New Year's Day, Children's Day, Mothers' Day, Fathers' Day, Maghpuja Day, the Thai New Year's Day, Visakhapuja Day (known as Buddha Day), the Floating Flowers Day, the Queen's Birthday and the King's Birthday.

Thai New Year is on 13th April. When 'Pisces moves into Aries'. This occasion is the Thai people's celebration day. However they also celebrate the usual New Year on 1st January to be in common with the rest of the world. This year, in the Buddhapadipa, there were about 5,000 people participating in Thai New Year celebration on 13th April! There were 10 Thai food stalls plus Arts and Thai classical dances.

On the full moon day in November each year there is the 'Floating Flower' festival. A ready-made flower, shaped like a lotus flower (a type of tropical water-lily), is floated on a pond or a river. This Buddhist festival is similar to 'Divali' of the Hindus. But the aim of the floating flower celebration is to pardon the Goddess of water.

People come to the Buddhapadipa Temple to get more knowledge of Theravada Buddhism and for meditation practice, perhaps for just a day, or a week of meditation retreat. Schoolchildren and university students visit the temple to gain more knowledge of Theravada Buddhism for their examinations.

b) SHINNYO-EN Japanese Buddhism

Source: *a visit to the Shinnyo-en Japanese Buddhist Centre, Long Ditton, where we were welcomed by Patrick O'Connor, the Rev. Yamaguchi and Japanese and British members of the Centre.*

History and Teachings of SHINNYO-EN

1. Shinnyo-En accepts the Buddha, known as Siddhartha Guatama as the Founder of Buddhism, but the Japanese name for the Buddha is '**Shakyamuni**'. It is known that the Buddha was born in the year 580 BC in the village of Lumbini in what is now known as Nepal. He was born into a Royal family and had no experience of any sufferings, particularly as a result of sickness, age or death. Having grown up and married, he one day left his palace and was faced with the three realities of suffering when he saw in one instance an old man, a sick man and a corpse. He also encountered a monk, and realized that this was a sign that he should relinquish his royal life and the trappings of luxury and pursue his personal quest for inner peace and harmony. Under a Bodhi (Asoka) tree, in a moment of deep meditation He was transformed and 'Enlightened', and thus became 'The Buddha'. The deity Brahman appeared before him and said: "O Great Holy One, go

forth and teach the path to truth. There are those who will understand and benefit from your efforts". The teachings that came out of his personal quest, can be summarised as a path for attaining ultimate freedom from ignorance and craving. The end result expected would be that, in everyday terms, true happiness and success is in realising one's own potential to be awakened and liberalised from angst and unhappiness. Moreover, Shakyamuni (Buddha) preached that '**wisdom**' arises naturally through perseverance and natural experience, and that we should develop '**compassion**' for others and work towards *the 'welfare of others'*.

2. Shinnyo-En is an independent Buddhist order based on the '**Nirvana Sutra**' and the Shingon school of Japanese Buddhism, one of Japan's oldest traditions. Founded in 1930, Shinnyo-En is now a global community of about 1 Million in almost 100 centres and 19 countries. The name Shinnyo-En means 'a place without borders where all who desire to bring forth their true nature are welcome'. Thus the values of kindness, sincerity, service, and compassion, respect of human life regardless of gender, age, racial origin, or religious affiliation are all enshrined within the teachings and within the spirit of Buddhism in general. Shinnyo-En's Founder, in one of his favourite sayings, states that: "The enlightenment of one person leads to the enlightenment of countless others". Shinnyo-En thus focuses on the '**Esoteric**' aspects of Buddhism as distinct from the '**Exoteric**' aspects.
3. The Three Pillars of Shinnyo-En Practice are:
 - Learning:* Active assimilation of the Teachings or Dharma. This leads to wisdom and the ability to teach.
 - Teaching:* Sharing one's wisdom and Dharma with others.
 - Service:* This is a natural extension of teaching and is an expression of selflessness and getting closer to one's true self.

Practice : Followers of Shinnyo-En engage in formal services of chanting and sharing of personal experiences, in meditation, under guidance or otherwise, and in services to the community. The aim is to emphasise the real quest for inner harmony and inner and outer peace.

Founder of SHINNYO-EN

The Great Master Shinjo Ito was born into a Buddhist family in 1906. In 1936 he entered Kyoto's Daigoji monastery, the head temple of the Daigo school of Shingon Buddhism. He mastered the Shingon esoteric teachings. He branched off from mainstream Shingon Buddhism by grafting the Nirvana Sutra - which emphasises Buddhism for lay practitioners - onto esoteric Shingon. He also instituted sesshin training (mentored meditative training aimed at 'Touching the Essence') and a mentoring system. The

Great Master's wife, Tomoji is considered the co-founder of this Buddhist order. The Great Master, at the young age of 14 found a hidden talent in himself, which was carving sculptures. This was later to become very useful when he made a sculpture of his two sons, who regrettably died at young ages and within a short period of time between their deaths, but more significantly when he decided to make the sculpture of the "Reclining Buddha". While the Buddha died at age 80, his aging body was not accompanied by any aging of the mind or spirit. The Master's expression of this in the sculpture was to work the Buddha's body in a reclining position with the flowing robe covering his body, but to sculpture his face as that of a young person who has not aged. The picture can be seen on the Shinnyo-En website.

The Master, Shinjo-Ito was succeeded by his daughter, who became known as Shinso-Ito. Her father passed away in 1989, and she is still the Head of the Order.

3 JAINISM

Source: A visit to the Shikharbandhi Jain Deraser (Temple) on 1st July, 2008 where we were welcomed and informed by Priest Vijay M Khetia



Introduction:

The Temple is sited on a serene idyllic, quintessentially 'English' setting in the heart of 'Herts'. It is founded by the 'Oshwal Association of the UK'. The plans were worked out in 1998 and the construction was completed in 2000. It is the only Jain purpose-built temple in the whole of Europe. As the planning permission was conditional on the temple being overall not higher than the mansion that is part of the original site, the land had to be dug out to reduce the base and therefore the overall edifice height.

The temple is exquisitely ornate in its design and there is an elevation, a 'mountain' composed of small edifices, symbolic of many temples forged into one. The overall shape of the building site is in the form of a 'Human' body, the central part showing the original 'Swastika' sign with the sides pointed in the opposite direction to that of the Nazi swastika. In Jain belief, the former brings good luck while the latter brings bad luck!! In the 'head'

area there are 3 dots, indicating '*Right Faith, Right Knowledge and Right Conduct*'. This is the way for '*Salvation*' (within the three aspects of life, Hell, Heaven & Earth). At the very top above the 3 dots area, there is a single dot indicating the '*Crescent of the Moon*' and thus the resting place of the liberated souls. The '*Swastika*' also symbolises our cycles of birth and death within 4 possible destinies: '*Heavenly Beings, Human Beings, Animal Beings (and these include birds, bugs and plants) and Hellish Being*'. The Temple is guarded by a lion on one side, symbolising strength and courage, and an elephant on the other side, symbolising vegetarianism and ability to carry and labour.

In the 'leg area of the overall shape, there is a '*Palm*' with a wheel containing 24 inscriptions symbolic of the 24 beings and aspects of life, the '*Tirthankars*'. The *palm* itself symbolises '*assurance*', and the wheel indicates '*non-violence*'.

The whole figure indicating the Human also represents the Jain description of the '*Universe*'.

The '*Cupola*' of the temple is shaped like the *Lotus*, a flower characterised by its beauty, purity and purifying powers, and the fact that it grows on mud.

Jain Teachings:

Jain is a religion of '*self discipline, and renouncing the material world*'. The symbolism for this renunciation is a pot of sandalwood, as this is colourless and coolant, and thus liberating.

In Jain belief there is no '*creator of the universe*', no '*destroyer*', and therefore no beginning and no end. There is no supreme being, no '*god*'. The soul remains in a state of '*nirvana*'.

They feel connected to Hinduism, and to Buddhism which preceded Jain by 100 years. In a similar way to the '*Buddha*', the founder of the Jain Faith, the '*24th Tirthankar*' was born in 599 BC to a King and Queen, and was heir to the throne. However, at the age of 28 he wished to renounce the world, but was persuaded by his brother to postpone that decision. He did, and at the age of 30 fulfilled his desire, left the palace and roamed the region teaching renunciation, liberation and permanent Nirvana. His teachings included non-violence, truth, non-stealing, right conduct and non-possession. He advocated against discrimination on grounds of caste, creed or faith, and taught the duty of protecting all living creatures. He had a single cloth garment on, and relied on food and drink given to him by anyone, provided the food was purposely done as an offering for him. He would never ask for food or drink. At the age of seventy two, in 527 BC, he (Mahavir) left his human body and attained '*Nirvana*' at Pavapuran the state of Bihar in India.

Jain's do not eat or knowingly cause any harm to any living thing. Thus, they are not only strictly vegetarian, but they eat only the product of the plant, not the root. They do not eat tubers (potatoes, carrots, etc), but only the products above ground, that is fruit and vegetables. They consider life as belonging to 5 categories, and all have to preserve:

- Human:** (4 limbs and upright). These are the highest category and thus non-violence is paramount.
- Animal:** (4 limbs but not upright). Animals have to be protected, and their milk is accepted for humans inasmuch as it does no harm to the animal to be milked.
- Vegetable:** As mentioned, those grown above ground can be consumed, but not tubers or roots.
- Insects:** (crawling) These have to be protected. Strictly speaking, Jain's should not conduct any waking activity after dark or before dawn for fear of stepping on, or causing other harm, to insects.

Bacteria and other microscopic creatures: (*These have no legs and no animation as the categories above. They are the lowest of the creation*):
To protect these, Jain's put on masks to avoid inhaling and therefore possibly harming them.

To Summarise: The way of "A-H-I-N-S-A"_encapsulates the teachings:

- A : Awareness:** To see our own self in the mirror of "Conscience and consciousness"
- H : Harmony:** "I will be a harmonious presence on this world and will cause no harm"
- I : Integration:** Integrate everything, body, mind and soul. Let us bring equanimity, equality and consideration to races, all religions, all ethnic groups, and all life.
- N : Nobility:** To remind us of the magnanimous quality of our souls, and to generate the feeling of generosity and compassion to all living creatures, in thought, word and deed.
- S : Service:** Serve somebody. Let your life be a service. Through service we become alive.
- A : Abstinence:** Abstinence from polluting ourselves with vile food, drink (as in alcohol), and anything that causes pain or suffering.

In Conclusion:

The 'Kalasha, the top of the copula of the temple, as it symbolizes man's eternal quest for 'immortality'. It is not held on top by cement but rather by an embedded pipe going all through its structure. Flying defiantly above it is the 'sacred flag or dhaja' which symbolizes the 'victory of good over evil'.

4 SIKHISM

Source: visit to the The Sikh Gurdwara, Hounslow on 14th March, 2007

History and Characteristics:

The Sikh Religion was started by Guru Nanak in 1469 A.D. within what was then an all Hindu society. Witnessing the surrounding reverence for animals (cows etc), Guru Nanak taught that prayer should be to "the Invisible God" only, and that one should use the brain to find "good" and "bad".



Guru Nanak was born to a wealthy family and his father gave him some money to set up in business. As he went out of his family palace he witnessed extreme poverty and spent all his money on these poor people. He then told His father: I have done "true business".

He then taught that money should be distributed to the poor and should not be hoarded. We should share food, happiness and sorrow with others. A particularly impressive feature of the Gurdwara, was the 24/7 availability of food and drink for all-comers.

'We know about birth and its process, but with death we do not know what will happen, as it is God's duty.'

Sikhs are taught sacrifice and courage. They keep their hair and beard so that they remain as natural as possible, and to remind them of God. They keep their hair clean. They wear a bangle to remind them not to do anything bad. They keep a dagger for defence, and they maintain clean underwear to remind them to refrain from 'malicious thought'.

After Guru Nanak there followed nine other Gurus (ten in all). The tenth, Guru Gobind Singh (who died in 1708), announced that people did not need an Inspired Guru any more, but left them with the 'Khalsa' or 'Pure' one, that is a leader who could demonstrate purity and the principles of the Founding Gurus. Some Gurus were executed, but this is considered part of the sacrifice that helped maintain the Sikh faithful and strong.

Sikhs have detached themselves from Hinduism and Islam, and so do not have rituals such as fasting, pilgrimage etc.

They believe in the one true God who belongs to anyone, and can be reached from any direction. Thus the 'Golden Temple' has entry doors from all directions. Sikhism teaches equality of all people, gender, rich and poor.

When you go to a Gurdwara you take your shoes off and put a cover over your head (women AND men). They have no priests, and anyone can read from the texts. People would go in, bow down reverently, bring some fruit or food and possibly put money into a receptacle anonymously. 'Harmandir Sahib' or the 'Golden Temple' in Amritsar, India, is the most historical religious centre for the Sikhs. However, it is not mandatory as a place of worship or pilgrimage.

For the Sikh, the aim of human endeavour in this life is to strive, through utmost dedication and purity, to achieve in the afterlife the ultimate goal of presence in the Sanctum of God.

5 ZOROASTRIANISM

Sources: *Visit to the Zoroastrian Centre in Harrow on 26th October 2005 and an article by Shahrokh Vafadari, a member of the Executive Committee of Elmbridge Multifaith Forum*



History and Teachings

The actual date of (aka Zarathustra), the founding prophet, is not clearly known, but he certainly appeared in ancient Persia and almost certainly before the days of Moses (about 1700-1600 BCE). The language of the teachings is Avestan, a sister language of Sanskrit. Sanskrit is the basic language of the Indo-European languages such as Greek, Latin and early Persian (Avestan). The 'Fire' is the medium that Zoroastrians use for their worship. It signifies warmth, light, a purifying power, and an important element of nature, and thus also a means through which the 'Creator' is recognised. The other basic natural elements to be kept clean are water, earth and air.

Zoroaster preached that there is one supreme God, 'Ahuramazda', who was entirely good and should be worshiped in thought, word and deed for the

protection and evolution of man and nature. Those who led "good" lives based on the ethical values of truth and justice ('Asha') would enjoy life after death. There is no clergy as such in Zoroastrianism, but there are individuals who, by learning the appropriate prayers, officiate at the ceremonies. Members of the community seek advice privately from the officiating priests, as wise individuals, as and when required.

The most important concept is that the "creation of happiness for others will lead to happiness all round".

Spread of Zoroastrians

The Zoroastrians are spread all over the world. In their country of origin, Persia (now Iran) they are facing a less than accommodating environment because of the prevailing theocratic regime. In India, they are called "Parsees", and they enjoy a good reputation and standing within the tolerant multi-cultural Indian society in general. They are mostly well to do, because of their ethos of hard work and accommodation to the environment they live within.

While their numbers may be proportionately static in India and Iran, their prevalence in the West, especially the USA is on the increase. However, they are subject to the stresses of inter-marriage and its consequent loss of sense of belonging, especially within the generation resulting from mixed marriages.

ZOROASTER and his Followers

Introduction

Today a very small group of people are called Zoroastrians, those who follow the teachings of the ancient prophet Zarathushtra or Zoroaster known to the ancient Greeks. Originally the followers of the faith called themselves *Mazdayasnis* the *Mazda* worshippers. Zoroaster called his Supreme Power *Mazda Ahura* or *Ahura Mazda*, the Wise Lord. Zoroaster lived in such an antiquity that his exact time and birth place could not be assessed. However there are some linguistic, archaeological and astronomical evidences to indicate broadly his period and birth place.

We have today some archaic hymns known as *Gathas* that are attributed to the prophet. These hymns, very poetic and spiritual in style are mainly in a form of conversation between the prophet and the Wise Lord and repeatedly praising the essence of truth. Zoroaster, at times similar to a philosopher, asks questions but the questions are answered by Zoroaster himself, and at one point he informs his followers that he has been inspired by the creator to spread Almighty's essence, righteousness. There are no mythology, no legends and no miracles in *The Gathas*. *The Gathas* and five other original religious books that we have today are called *Avesta*, the holy books of Zoroastrians and the unique language they are written in is called *Avestan*

language. There is no other book in the world written in this language. *Avestan* is close to the Sanskrit language of the oldest *Vedic* scripture *Rig Veda*. From the language we could deduce that Zoroaster was from the Indo-European race and spoke in an Indo-European dialect. There are similarities between Sanskrit, Latin, Old Greek the Slavic languages and Persian.

History

In studying history of religions, Zoroastrianism is an important subject. About 4,000 years ago the landmass of Europe, from the Ural Mountains in the east to the country of Eire, the most western point, was occupied by many tribes that spoke in closely related dialects. One could strongly suggest that these tribes had common ancestors that are called Indo-Europeans. Some of these tribes eventually migrated eastward towards Transoxania the land between the two rivers, Oxus and Jaxartes. From there they moved to the northern part of Afghanistan and eastern border of Iran and these groups, in a restricted sense, today are referred to as *Aryans*, the noble people. The *Aryans* are a group of Indo-Europeans who eventually split into two groups, one migrating to the Indus Valley and the other to the mainland of Iran.

In parallel with the migration of *Aryans*, roughly the same time, early centuries of the second millennium BCE, another group of Indo-Europeans migrated on the west side of the Caspian Sea towards Anatolia, the Asia Minor. These people are known as Hittites. The Hittites established an empire and have left behind extensive archaeological remains and at the height of their rule they fought the Egyptians in the time of Ramses II (1292-1225 BCE).

The similarity of Sanskrit, *Avestan* and early European languages indicates the historical bond and eventual dispersal of the tribes spanning from Eire to India and the reason for naming them Indo-Europeans.

Zoroaster as an individual

Not unlike many other ancient religions, Zoroastrians have some legends attributing supernatural powers to their hero. However these attributes are limited in number such as: laughing at birth, escaping injury when placed in the path of a herd of bovines and curing the horse of his patron Kavi Vishtasb. None of these unnatural acts are mentioned by Zoroaster himself in his hymns *The Gathas*.

The name Zarathushtra is spelled and pronounced in many different ways, one version suggests meaning 'The golden star'. Apparently he was from a clan known as Spitman. His father's name was Poroushasb and his mother Dagdoveh. He mentions one of his daughters named Pouruchista in his hymns. In fact he conducts her marriage ceremony to Jamasb a courtier at the court of Kavi Vishtasb.

Astronomers have worked out his date of birth to be 26th March 1768 BCE. He declared his mission at the age of thirty and Zoroastrians use 3,745 years ago as the start of their religious calendar. His death is remembered on 26 December at the age of seventy seven and few months.

What makes him unique amongst all the ancient prophets is that he has left some poems in an archaic tongue, preserved probably orally at the beginning, that are passed to us today.

The message

As mentioned the language of Brahmins, *Rig Veda*, Sanskrit is of the same stock as *Avestan* of Zoroaster's hymns, *The Gathas*. However, the contents of these ancient compositions are quite different, suggesting that a doctrinal diversity must have existed in the early centuries of the 2nd millennium BCE amongst the tribes living on the eastern border of Iran. We also know that Zoroaster encourages his people to avoid cattle rustling, and being involved in drug induced orgies leading to animal sacrifice. He considers himself the protector of the mistreated animals and recommends a settled agricultural life.

Zoroaster selects the name 'Mazda', wisdom for his only supreme God that provides life on earth and the unknown afterlife. It seems that he deliberately avoids do's and not to do's as we see in other faiths, in order to establish a general everlasting framework for '*Daena Vanguhi*' the universal belief of 'Good Conscience'. In this thought-provoking *Yasna* 30.2 he states: "Listen to the noblest teachings with an attentive ear. With your penetrating mind discriminate between these twin mentalities (good and evil), person by person each one for own self. Awake, to proclaim this truth before the final judgement overtakes you". We can see that he gives us the choice but recommends the path of truth '*Asha*' and talks so early in human civilization of the 'Day of Judgement'.

Zoroaster believes that Ahura Mazda, the Wise Lord, is responsible for all the goodness in this world and afterlife. In other word what is good is Godly. Now the question could be asked where 'evil' comes from? He vehemently suggests that Ahura Mazda is total goodness and the essence of truth, and the opposing force is evil and falsehood. In our familiar daily life it is 'light' versus 'darkness'. If Ahura Mazda is the light that brightens our life and darkness brings gloom and misery, then similar to our experience switching off the Lord's light would automatically bring about darkness of evil, a self created mentality.

It could be concluded that the great Wise Lord of Zoroaster has no ambivalent personality to contain both good and evil, total goodness and truth are God's personality, and in the absence of these noble qualities evil and falsehood appear in this world.

The followers

Zoroastrianism being such an ancient belief naturally could not have been free from the flux of history. Ancient, prehistoric customs have survived and reflected in *Avesta*, the holy books, some are admirable and some unpractical. There is repeated reverence for natural phenomena, all that Ahura Mazda has created for the benefit and happiness of mankind. The four basic elements: water, earth, fire and air are to be revered and not polluted. To be environmentally conscious and live a clean green life must have been a giant step in human civilization so distant in history.

One of the short daily prayers recited repeatedly as a 'mantra' is:

*Righteousness is the best
It brings happiness
Pursue goodness for the sake of goodness (not for reward)*

The written history of Zoroastrian Kings, in 6th century BCE, such as Cyrus, Darius and Artaxerxes, is well documented in the Old Testament, Isaiah, Ezra, Daniel and Nehemiah. They are admired for being fair and generous, never forced their religion on others and had total respect for other peoples beliefs. It has been suggested that the three wise men, *Magi*, who went to see the baby Jesus in Jerusalem were Zoroastrian priests on the day known as Epiphany (seeing God), the 6th of the first month. In Zoroastrian solar calendar the sixth of the first month is the 6th day of spring, Zoroaster's birthday (26th of March).

Being traditionally farmers living close to nature and dependent on the cycles of the seasons, all the solstice days such as vernal and autumnal equinoxes, the shortest and longest days are celebrated. The first day of spring is the start of the Zoroastrian New Year called Nou-Rooz. Additionally there is a feast day in every month for the followers to break bread with each other. Boys and girls at the age of maturity, about fifteen for boys and slightly younger for girls, volunteer to go through the initiation ceremony. After the initiation they become responsible for their own deeds, any person that goes through the initiation ceremony is endowed with a white sacred cord and a white vest to use at prayer times. Zoroastrianism in modern times has not been a missionary religion and does not easily accept converts, which explains the reduction in the number of followers.

Groups called Parsis (Parsees) in the Indian subcontinent are Zoroastrians who migrated from Persia (Iran) after 7th century invasion of the Arab Moslems. Though small in number they contribute enormously to the progress of business, science and political life in the sub-continent.

To a Zoroastrian, life is the microcosm of cosmic battle between good and evil in which we are involved, and we should soldier on to win the battle and become one of The Almighty's co-workers!

The ancient Zoroastrian motto that remains unchangeable today is:

**Good Thoughts
Good Words
Good Deeds**



