

Building Bridges of Understanding

*An Interfaith
Response to
September 11*



**Study Guide
For Congregations**

Second Edition



California
Council of
Churches

Building Bridges of Understanding

A Study Guide for Congregations

California Council of Churches

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Building Bridges of Understanding

A Curriculum of the California Council of Churches

This introductory study of six of the world's major religious traditions represents a beginning in the important task of coming to understand our neighbors of different faiths. Although California is home to possibly as many as 2,000 different faith groups, we chose only six to highlight in this initial curriculum. The five traditionally recognized "major" faith traditions are included: Hinduism, Judaism, Buddhism, Christianity and Islam. We chose to add Sikhism as the sixth subject of study, both for its large numbers in California and because of the prominence of its followers in the events following September 11th, 2001.

The study can be adapted to many uses. Perhaps the most common design would be over a six-week period, focusing on one faith each week. Participants should read the background material and answer the accompanying questions before coming to the study session. In this approach, each study session is designed to last one hour, and includes a 10-minute video presentation.

Because the study materials are appropriate for high school students and adults, and for interfaith and Christian audiences, we encourage congregations and faith groups to partner with others. Whether in Christian ecumenical settings, or more broadly interfaith collaborations, the richness of the material will be enhanced by such encounters, and will result in building of bridges of understanding.

Objectives

Our chief objective is to provide an introductory curriculum that will encourage participants to do further in-depth study of these traditions on their own, and to seek out ways to build bridges of understanding with these neighbors from other faiths.

Building Bridges

Martin Luther King Jr. once said that 11:00 a.m. on Sunday mornings is one of the most segregated times of the week in the U.S. Unfortunately, little has changed since he uttered those words. Reaching out to make contact with and to understand those who are different from us can be a daunting task, but it is crucial if we are to make *E Pluribus Unum* a reality in the 21st century.

There are a number of creative ideas used by other communities on the California Council of Churches website at www.calchurches.org.

What follows are some helpful guidelines for approaching specific faith communities:

1. Remember that being a minority of any kind can be intimidating. If you are from the dominant faith in your area, reach out in neighborly hospitality to these communities. Many of them would like to get to know you, and a friendly invitation is usually all it takes.
2. Many minority faith communities tend to take a "low profile" stance. It may require some research to find your local Buddhist, Sikh or Hindu gathering place. Check the local newspaper for past news stories, call the religion department of nearby universities, or visit the pluralism project website (www.fas.harvard.edu/~pluralism/) to find communities near you. You can also visit our Building Bridges link at www.calchurches.org.
3. Some faith groups do engage in practices that may be unfamiliar to you. For example, it is a sign of respect for women visiting a Muslim place of worship to wear clothing that covers arms and legs, and a headscarf. Also out of respect, many Muslim men choose not to shake hands with women. Don't be embarrassed to ask what is appropriate.

We encourage you to budget your time in using this curriculum to insure meaningful consideration of how your faith community can build bridges with others in your area.

Some Hints for Session Leaders

Teaching about the world's religions is no simple task. It requires sensitivity to the beliefs and faith commitments of others, and a genuine interest in learning about the differences that constitute the deepest commitments in human life. However, one need not be an expert in religious studies to effectively lead a group of such sensitive and interested learners on a journey toward deeper understanding and respect.

Please review carefully the “Tips for Effective Discussion Leadership” and the “Discussion Ground Rules” reprinted in the first few pages of this study guide. While accurate information about the faiths is crucial for learning, establishing a safe, open and robust climate for inquiry, discussion and active listening is essential to your success.

Since most of us have not had an educational experience with the major religious traditions of the world, much of this material may be new to you. Please take the pretest for yourself prior to preparing to teach this unit, and assess your own knowledge. If you would like more background on these faiths, please refer to the resources section in the back of the guide.

One additional word on the organization of this curriculum: it is arranged chronologically, with the oldest religion coming first. Many resources on the world’s religions are organized by dividing the faiths between “eastern” and “western” traditions. While that approach has some obvious advantages, for this course we have used chronology to add a second dimension of learning for the participants, and to offer a more engaging format for those who may be familiar with one or the other “set” of faiths.

Some Additional Tips

Times given for each segment of the lesson are approximate. If small group discussion winds to a close before the time is up, use the remaining minutes for whole group discussion of the topic.

If time is too short, suggest that participants continue their discussions after class is over.

Be sure to always choose a timekeeper to monitor the discussion and keep participants on track with their sharing, and a recorder to keep a written record of the discussion.

If questions remain, ask participants to research the answers and bring them to the next session. Also, be sure to refer participants to the resources listed in the appendix of this study guide.

Video and DVD Resource

The video and DVD resource is a wonderful way to put a human face on each faith tradition. This resource in either format is designed to complement the written material, and to demonstrate the various ways in which each tradition engages with the community. Either the video or DVD format is available from the California Council of Churches: 2715 K Street, Suite D, Sacramento, CA 95816. Phone (916) 442-5447 to order or e-mail your request to cccinfo@calchurches.org. Cost is \$10, which includes postage and handling.

Website

The California Council of Churches website (www.calchurches.org) includes additional resources, ideas for building bridges and collaborative community projects, and links to other helpful sites. The USC Center for Religion and Civic Culture has developed a useful website of resources and interfaith activity throughout California at www.usc.edu/crcc/manyfaiths. Encourage class participants to review these websites.

Copy Material For Distribution

Feel free to copy the appropriate materials for each session and distribute to class participants. It is recommended that you hand out each background piece one week in advance. Material for each session can also be downloaded from the website at www.usc.edu/crcc/manyfaiths or www.calchurches.org.



Photographs by Jerry Berndt, courtesy of the USC Center for Religion and Civic Culture.



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Christian Church
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Ethiopian Orthodox Church
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Evangelical Lutheran
Church in America
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Greek Orthodox Church
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National Baptist Convention
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Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)
•
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•
Swedenborgian Church
•
United Church of Christ
•
United Methodist Church
•
Universal Fellowship of
Metropolitan Community Churches
•
Church Women United
•
Orthodox Clergy Council

January, 2003

Dear Friends of the
California Council of Churches,

In the aftermath of the September 11 attacks,
Americans have displayed an ignorance and
misunderstanding about the variety and diversity of
religious traditions in the U.S. today.

As Harvard scholar Diana Eck has noted, "How
Americans of all faiths and beliefs can engage with
one another to shape a positive pluralism is one of
the essential questions—perhaps the most important
one facing American society. While race has been the
dominant American social issue in the past century,
religious diversity in our civil and neighborly lives
is emerging, mostly unseen, as the great challenge of
the twenty-first century."

There are six major religious traditions that
co-exist in California. While diverse in theology
and practice, they all at heart encompass a vision of
the sacredness of human life, community and justice.
Yet many of us have little experience with or
knowledge of those traditions outside our own.

The California Council of Churches invites you to use
this introductory study resource as an important step
in *Building Bridges of Understanding*. While not
exhaustive, the Building Bridges study guide and
video serve as a good starting point on the journey
of interfaith understanding.

I hope you and your congregation will join us as we
commit ourselves to *Building Bridges of
Understanding*.

Sincerely,

Scott D. Anderson
Executive Director

Tips for Effective Discussion Leadership

(Courtesy of the Study Circle Resource Center, Pomfret, CT)

1. Be Prepared

The leader does not need to be an expert (or even the most knowledgeable person in the group) on the topic being discussed, but should be the best prepared for the discussion. This means understanding the goals of the adult forum (or study circle), familiarity with the subject, thinking ahead of time about the directions in which the discussion might go, and preparation of discussion questions to aid the group in considering the subject. Solid preparation will enable you to give your full attention to group dynamics and to what individuals in the group are saying.

2. Set a relaxed and open tone

- Welcome everyone and create a friendly and relaxed atmosphere.
- Well-placed humor is always welcome and helps people focus differences on ideas rather than on personalities.

3. Establish clear guidelines for discussion

At the beginning of the study session, establish the guidelines and ask participants if they agree to them or want to add anything:

- All group members are encouraged to express and reflect on their honest opinions; all views should be respected.
- Though disagreement and conflict about ideas can be useful, disagreements should not be personalized. Put-downs, name-calling, labeling, or personal attacks will not be tolerated.
- It is important to hear from everyone. People who tend to speak a lot in groups should make special efforts to allow others the same opportunity.
- The role of the leader is to remain neutral and to guide conversation according to the ground rules.

4. Stay aware of and assist the group process

- Always use your 'third-eye'; you are not only helping to keep the group focussed on the content of the discussion, but you will be monitoring how well the participants are communicating with each other – who has spoken, who hasn't spoken, and whose points haven't yet received a fair hearing.
- Consider splitting up into smaller groups to examine a variety of viewpoints or to give people a chance to talk more easily about their personal connection to the issue.
- When wrestling with when to intervene, err on the side of nonintervention.
- Don't talk after each comment or answer every question; allow participants to respond directly to each other. The most effective leaders often say little, but are constantly thinking about how to move the group toward its goals.
- Don't be afraid of silence. It will sometimes take a while for someone to offer an answer to a question you pose.
- Don't let anyone dominate; try to involve everyone.
- Remember: a forum is not a debate but a group dialogue. If participants forget this, don't hesitate to ask the group to help reestablish the guidelines.

5. Help the group grapple with content

Make sure the group considers a wide range of views. Ask the group to think about the advantages and disadvantages of different ways of looking at an issue or solving a problem. In this way, the trade-offs involved in making tough choices become apparent.

- Ask participants to think about the concerns and values that underlie their beliefs.
- Don't allow the group to focus on or be overly influenced by one particular personal experience or anecdote.
- Either summarize the discussion occasionally or encourage group members to do so.
- Remain neutral about content and be cautious about expressing your own values.
- Help participants to identify 'common ground' but don't try to force consensus.

6. Use questions to help make the discussion more productive

Some useful discussion questions:

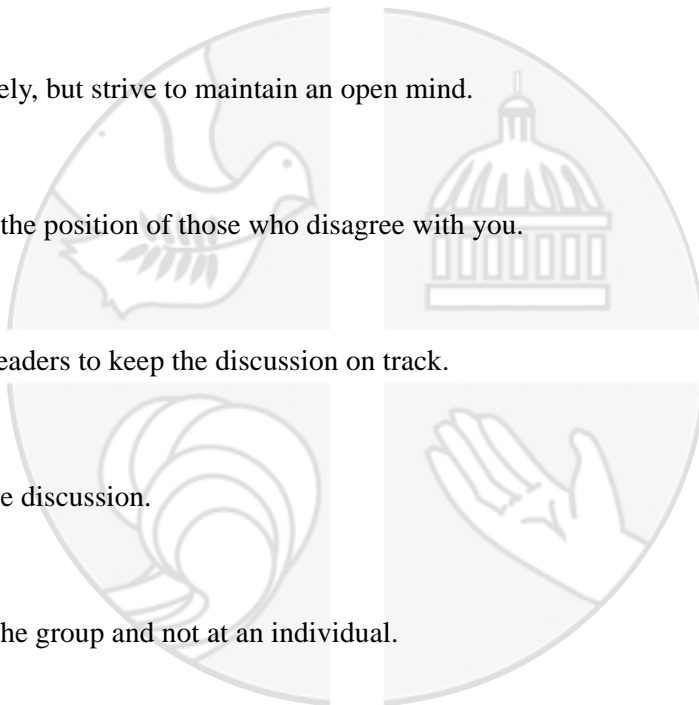
- What seems to be the key point here?
- What is the crux of your disagreement?
- Does anyone want to add to (or support, or challenge) that point?
- Could you give an example or describe a personal experience to illustrate that point?
- Could you help us understand the reasons behind your opinion?
- What experiences or beliefs might lead people of faith to support that point of view?

7. Reserve adequate time for closing the discussion

- Ask the group for last comments and thoughts about the subject.
- You may wish to ask participants to share any new ideas or thoughts they've had as a result of the discussion.
- If you will be meeting again, remind the group of the readings and subject for the next session.
- Thank everyone for their contributions.
- Provide some time for the group to evaluate the group process, either through sharing aloud or through a brief written evaluation.

Discussion Ground Rules

- ✓ Share your concerns and beliefs.
- ✓ Listen carefully to others
- ✓ Be willing to examine your own beliefs in light of what others say.
- ✓ Speak your mind freely, but strive to maintain an open mind.
- ✓ Strive to understand the position of those who disagree with you.
- ✓ Cooperate with the leaders to keep the discussion on track.
- ✓ Don't monopolize the discussion.
- ✓ Address remarks to the group and not at an individual.
- ✓ Communicate your needs to the leaders.
- ✓ Value your own experience and opinions.
- ✓ Engage in friendly disagreement: avoid emotional argumentation, yelling, and personal put-downs.
- ✓ Remember that humor and a pleasant manner can go far in helping you make your points.



PRETEST – WORLD RELIGIONS IN AMERICA: BUILDING BRIDGES OF UNDERSTANDING

Please answer true or false to the following questions:

1. When they are initiated into Sikhism, men change their surname to a word meaning “lion.”

True False

2. Hinduism is an ancient religion coming from a single source and founder.

True False

3. Muslims must pray only three times each day

True False

4. Reform Judaism ordained its first woman rabbi in 1972.

True False



Photographs by Jerry Berndt, courtesy of the USC Center for Religion and Civic Culture.

5. A Bodhisattva in Buddhism is an enlightened one who chooses to work for the salvation of all beings.

True False

6. The Romans crucified Jesus, a first century Jewish man whom Christians worship as the Son of God.

True False

7. Jewish holidays begin at sunrise.

True False

8. Muslim civilization led the western world during the Golden Age of Islam, which is roughly the same time period as the dark and Middle Ages in Europe.

True False

9. Hinduism recognizes four natural stages of life, each with its own appropriate goals and behavior.

True False

10. Sikhs do not believe in the equality of men and women.

True False

11. Even by its adherents, Buddhism is often spoken of as a philosophy rather than as a religion.

True False

12. Roman Catholic and Orthodox Christians accept the 12 books of the Apocrypha as an official part of the Bible.

True False

SESSION 1 - HINDUISM

SESSION PLAN

Participants will come to the session having read the background piece (pages 9-12) on Hinduism. By the end of this session participants will:

- ✓ Understand something about the history, traditions, beliefs and practices of Hinduism.
- ✓ Reflect on the experiences of Hindus in the United States and California.
- ✓ Begin to consider ways to promote understanding by building bridges with Hindu congregations in their own communities.

Gathering and Introduction

5 minutes

Arrange seating in a circle. Open with prayer, meditation or a moment of silence. Ask each person to introduce him or herself.

Pretest

5 minutes

Copy and distribute the Pretest on page 7 to each participant and ask him or her to take 5 minutes to answer the true/false questions. Explain that the purpose of the test is to allow them to assess their own knowledge of these 6 world religions prior to beginning the course. It will serve as a gauge of their increasing knowledge as they go along. Answers are on page 38. *Do not share answers at this time.*

Review Reading and Study Questions

10 minutes

The leader will spend 5-10 minutes reviewing the reading (see review outline at sidebar) and going over the study questions. Pay particular attention to the following questions during the discussion:

1. What was most surprising from the reading?
2. What, if anything, do you admire about Hinduism?
3. What would you like to know more about? (Invite participants to research any unanswered questions and bring their findings to the next class.)

Yoga – The Path to God

10 minutes

Divide participants into groups of 3-4. Ask them to select a recorder and timekeeper for each group. Ask each person to reflect again on the various forms of yoga in Hinduism, considering which one appeals to them. Ask them to make a list of the ways they might apply that form of yoga to living their own faith. Share some with the whole group if time allows.

Video Segment

10 minutes

The video companion piece on Hinduism is about 10 minutes long. Play this through for the group, asking the group to pay special attention to the model of community involvement and the viewpoints of youth, keeping in mind the conversations they just had, and the questions that remained for them.

Discussion of the Video

10 minutes

Arrange the groups in dyads (twos). Ask them to list the challenges to Hindus living in California and the U.S. that they saw in the video, and any insights regarding the yoga paths they see represented in the video. Share some of these with the entire group.

Assignments

5 minutes

Ask each participant to come up with two ideas about how their congregation could build bridges with Hindus in their community. If they are not aware of Hindus in their local area, ask if someone might be willing to research whether there are any Hindu groups in the area. If there seem to be none, ask the group to consider how they might promote respect and understanding of Hinduism in their congregation.

Closing

5 minutes

Ask participants to complete the sentence “A new insight I received today is...” Close with a simple prayer.

REVIEW OUTLINE

- Hinduism is the oldest living religion, with no one founder.
- God can be experienced as an inner reality in our lives while living.
- Although many faces of the Divine are worshiped by Hindus, they are all facets of the One Supreme Reality, called Brahman.
- The written teachings of the Hindus are called the Vedas. The Upanishads are a part of the Vedas. Other important writings are the Mahabharata (includes the Bhagavad Gita), and the Ramayana.
- Karma is the law of cause and effect, which maintains that our present situation is the result of our past actions. Reincarnation explains the vast differences in the condition and experience of people in this life by basing their situation on past karmic debts.
- Yoga is the spiritual path to God. There are four such paths, each one speaking to a particular personality type. *Jnana* yoga is the intellectual search for truth; *bhakti* yoga is the path of loving devotion; *karma* yoga is working for the welfare of others; and *raja* yoga includes the physical and meditation practices familiar to many in the west.
- The four stages of life in Hinduism are: 1) the student, 2) the householder, 3) the retiree, 4) the sannyasa.
- The four goals in life for Hindus are 1) the fulfillment of legitimate desires, 2) the attainment of success in this world, 3) the yearning for righteousness and morality, 4) the attainment of the spiritual goal of salvation and enlightenment.
- The Hindu “trinity” recognizes three manifestations of the power of Brahman: creation – Brahma; preservation – Vishnu; and destruction – Shiva. Shakti is the name given to the Divine Mother aspect of Brahman.
- The main worship for Hindus takes place in the home.

INTRODUCTION TO HINDUISM

Hinduism is widely regarded as the oldest living religion. It has no single founder, but is the result of the religious experience gathered over several thousand years by countless men and women in their search for the meaning and purpose of life. The roots of Hinduism that weave together Aryan, Dravidian and ancient tribal cultures native to India can be traced back to before 3000 BCE.

BELIEFS and SYMBOLS

The central belief of Hinduism is that God can be experienced as a reality in our life here and now. God is the infinite, eternal essence of all that is. In reality that divine Being alone exists, and the purpose of life is to draw close to God and to experience God's reality directly within ourselves. Human beings, in order to feel close to God, like to approach the Divinity in a personal way. Historically in Hinduism, many forms of God have been worshiped, but they are always seen as the various facets of the One, called Brahman.

SACRED BOOKS/SCRIPTURE

The ancient sages' experiences were originally handed down orally from teacher to student and not actually written down until comparatively recent times. The teachings discovered by these sages in their introspection are called the *Vedas*. They are a vast compilation containing instructions for worship and hymns, as well as deep philosophy. They consist of more than 50 separate works. Hindus understand the *Vedas* as "heard" Divine Revelation, and not of human origin, although human beings were the means through which the Divine wisdom was revealed. The last part of the *Vedas*, called the *Upanishads*, teach that oneness with the supreme Reality (Brahman) is the ultimate goal of human beings, and that salvation or liberation is achieved through life experience.

In modern times, it is mostly the concluding portion, the philosophy, which is given importance. This is called the *Vedanta* or end (anta) of the *Vedas*.

The religious literature of Hinduism also contains a vast body of auxiliary scriptures that act like commentaries on the *Vedas*. Examples include the *Smritis*, or writings about Hindu law, and the two epics: the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* (which includes the *Bhagavad Gita*). These scriptures contain spiritual instructions as well as histories of dynasties, and also stories of the lives of saints and sages, both men and women, describing their experiences of God and of spiritual truths.

KARMA and REINCARNATION

Karma is the moral law of cause and effect that maintains that our present situation is the result of our past actions. The law of karma implies that human beings create their own future destiny (individually and

collectively) by accepting responsibility and accountability for their thoughts and actions now.

In order to account for the vast differences in the condition and experience of people in this life, in order to try to explain why some are born to apparently undeserved misery and suffering, while others are born to happiness, it is proposed that this is the fruit of the actions of a previous life. This is the theory of reincarnation. As one grows morally and spiritually, and as one becomes more devoted to God, the fruits of these actions, and therefore reincarnation, will not affect us so much. Thus gradually one attains freedom from the need to reincarnate.

YOGA

To attain this freedom ("*moksha*") one practices one or more of the four main spiritual paths, collectively termed *yoga*. These four paths are meant for the four main personality types found among human beings. Those who are mainly of an intellectual and philosophical bent of mind can use the path of *jnana yoga*. In this path one analyzes all facets of one's experience, trying to reach the reality of God by renouncing what is unreal and untrue, and earnestly striving to find the real, the true, the eternal. Those people who are of a more emotional nature may follow the path of *bhakti yoga*. In this path one worships God with devotion and love, offering one's whole being in His service, making him the beloved of their hearts. For those of active temperament, there is the path of *karma yoga*, which emphasizes total selflessness and an active dedication to the welfare of all beings. Then there is the path of mental control and psychology, known as *raja yoga*. After the requisite disciplines of mental and physical purification have been undergone, one strives through mental control and meditation to still the restlessness of the mind. *Raja yoga* is the path out of which western physical yoga practice emerges. Most people, being of mixed temperaments, like to undertake a combination of several of these yogas. It is always recommended that those who want to undertake these spiritual practices avail themselves of the guidance of an experienced person who can point out the difficulties along the way and give proper guidance.

GOALS and STAGES OF LIFE

Hinduism recognizes that all the various goals of human beings can be divided into four broad categories: 1) the fulfillment of legitimate desires, 2) the attainment of success in this world, 3) the yearning for righteousness and morality, and 4) the attainment of the spiritual goal of salvation or enlightenment. These goals are part of a holistic view of human experience and all can be practiced together. The practice of righteousness, however, must pervade them all. It is the foundation on which they all stand.

To enable people to pursue these four goals, Hinduism recognizes four stages of a person's life. The first stage is that of the student, where one learns to lead a disciplined, pure life, devoted to the acquisition of knowledge, to prepare one for bearing the responsibilities associated with the next stage. Stage two is the householder whose labor supports all the other stages. In this stage, along with the responsibility of taking care of his own family as well as his larger family, namely the whole society, the householder can pursue the first three goals of life. When, however, his children have grown up and have children of their own, then the householder should prepare himself to turn his mind away from involvement with mundane things, and direct it to the fourth goal of life, spiritual realization. To do this he enters the third stage of life: He and his wife withdraw to a retreat to begin a life of contemplation and meditation. When, after many years, they have both become established in this new life and accustomed to it, then they separately enter the monastic life (*sannyasa*), stage four, devoting their whole time to the practice of *yoga* for the realization of God. In this way, in their final years on earth they will be engrossed in the search for spiritual fulfillment and joy.

DEITIES and INCARNATIONS OF GOD

All the manifestations of power in this universe can be resolved into three: 1) creation, 2) preservation, and 3) destruction. Brahman, or God, is the only reality. So one should be able to perceive God in all three manifestations of power. This is described in a personal way by associating creation, preservation, and destruction each with a particular aspect of the Godhead. The creative power is called *Brahma*. The sustaining power is called *Vishnu*, and the destructive power is called *Shiva*. Each of these, however, as well as all the other deities to be mentioned below, is actually the totality of God, personalized and limited as it were, but not limited in actuality. As an example of this, *Shiva* is often pictured as the *Nataraja*, the king of dancers, whose dance brings worlds into being and also dissolves them, all in one graceful movement.

The totality of the Divine power can also be associated with the idea of motherhood, involving birth and nourishment, forgiveness, help and protection. God as the Divine Mother, or *Shakti*, is worshiped as the ultimate refuge in all situations of life. All beings are Her children.

From time to time, as righteousness declines and irreligion prevails, a human being is born who contains within himself such a superabundance of beneficent power for the uplift of humanity, that people begin to worship him as a veritable embodiment of divinity, as an incarnation of God. Krishna and Râma are two such incarnations in the history of Hinduism. In these days, also Sri Ramakrishna, the great nineteenth century mystic is thought of in a similar light.

RITUALS and CELEBRATIONS

The central Hindu ritual is meditation. It is a process of calming and concentrating the mind. In an utterly calm and concentrated mind, the Divine reality of God is

directly perceived. The process of meditation can take many forms, but the general tendency in Hinduism is for the worshiper to adopt an aspect of the Divinity that appeals to him or her, and to visualize it in their heart as living and radiant, and to concentrate on it with the help of certain words which are symbols of the divinity. A qualified teacher or guide is highly recommended for the successful practice of meditation.

Other rituals include worship of God by offering of perfume, flowers, incense, light, and food, as well as other items. God is here treated as an honored guest who is thought to have just arrived in the home. Worship is also done in temples, but that is secondary in importance to what is done in the home. Other religious rites include pilgrimages to holy shrines, and festivals associated with different aspects of Divinity, as well as rituals associated with the life-cycle: birth, first taking of solid food, adulthood, marriage, etc. Thousands of these festivals are celebrated throughout India, but the most widely celebrated worldwide are listed below:

Dassehra (Dusserah) The festival that lasts "ten days."

This may be the most popular festival, celebrated for ten days in September/October. The Goddess Durgâ is worshipped during the first nine days of the festival, and the 10th day is a celebration of the victory of Râma, the hero of the Râmâyana, over the demon king of Srî Lanka, Râvana.

Dîpâvali (Dîwâlî). This is the festival of lamps, and honors the Goddess Lakshmî, the goddess of wealth and good fortune. The festival lasts five days in September/October or October/November. It also commemorates Râma's victory over Râvana and his return to the city of Ayodhyâ.

Srî Râmakrishna Jayanti. This celebration, which occurs in February, marks the birthday of Srî Ramakrishna, the great nineteenth-century mystic.

Shivarâtri (Night of Shiva). This celebration in February/March marks the time when Shiva manifests himself in the form of the flaming linga, or phallus, showering his devotees with his grace. Hindus of all castes and classes celebrate it across India.

Holi. This two-day spring festival, celebrated in February/March, marks the end of winter, and is one of the most popular Hindu festivals.

Râma-navamî. This is a celebration of the birth of Râma, and comes in March/April.

Srî-Krishna-Jayantî. Celebrated in July/August or August/September, this day commemorates the birthday of Krishna.

WOMEN'S ROLES IN HINDUISM

From the most ancient times, women have played a prominent role in the development of the Hindu religion. In the Vedic period the ceremonies could not be performed unless both husband and wife were actively present. Throughout Indian history down to the present day, a galaxy of women saints and sages played a prominent role, as spiritual teachers and as leaders in every walk of life, even at times as prime ministers and leaders of armies. ☞

PERSONAL FOCUS

Rashmi Sharma Singh was born and raised in India. She currently teaches American multicultural studies at Sonoma State University.

"[The first few days after 9/11] I held on to the notion of the equalizing force of a Divine Karma, not retaliation. Discarding the 'eye for an eye' approach, and allowing The Divine to mercifully sort out who deserved punishment, and how, as well as when. ...my thoughts went towards the battle scene in the Geeta, when Krishna tells Arjun why he needed to do battle with his relatives."

"Prayer, reflection and meditation were the primary religious resources from my religion that helped me after 9-11. [Within the Hindu communities] prayers, charitable giving, helping individual families affected, funds collected for various non-Hindu charities, blood drives, etc. These acts happened, as they should have, without being restricted or confined to any one faith's specific community."

"Soon after 9-11, following the hate crime of the killing of a Sikh mistaken as a Muslim, what quickly became a larger concern among activist South Asians was the question of mistaken identity. As immigrants, most of us had generally been more concerned with assimilation (fitting in). In the case of Sikhs, their religious liberty meant that the turbaned and bearded Sikh males were very visible as minorities; thus the hate crimes. The Sikh community went to great lengths to try to educate the media community about Sikhism as being distinct from Islam. The media, in turn, generally, went to great lengths to educate the American public about Afghanistan and Islam, and helped lower hate crimes towards all South Asians..."

"Building bridges requires an examination of one's own faith, including the negatives/shortcoming... and in an adversarial climate of 'us and them' - very little gets done on a large, public scale. After the shock of the events of 9-11, very understandably, most people wanted normalcy, and business as usual restored as soon as possible..."

"Some individuals have taken a more proactive approach and are becoming more involved with their community. The community of South Asian Americans like them, as well as Americans generally..."

"I believe that education holds the only lasting, long-term key to the problems that manifested themselves as 9-11..."

"In 1991 I started a niche educational materials publishing company called Vidya Books out of my meager savings. Vidya is the Sanskrit word for spiritually grounded knowledge..."

"In 1999 I was invited to teach at Sonoma State University. I teach undergraduate students and future teachers in the department of American Multicultural Studies at Sonoma State University. As an immigrant, as a naturalized US citizen who was born and raised in India, I not

only include South Asia, but also how to apply the principles of liberty, justice and equality to people of all races, ethnicities national origins, religions, politics and beliefs..."

"We cannot control people's ability to inflict harm (the same knowledge can give us either beautiful fireworks or harmful ammunition based on our individual intentions and choice), but we can educate so inhumane and individual choices are less likely, and repetition of events like 9-11 are decreased." 🙏

COMMUNITY FOCUS

Chinmaya Mission, San Jose

Chinmaya Mission, San Jose conducts cultural classes for students (K-12) and vedanta classes for adults throughout various locations in the Bay Area. Throughout the year, there are observances and celebrations of all the major Hindu festivals and events, as well as various yagnas and camps. Swami Chinmayananda acquired the property on Park Avenue in San Jose in 1987 and named it Sandeepany San Jose. Swami Chinmayananda also formally created the Chinmaya Mission San Jose in 1992. Krishnalaya located in the town of Piercy, CA is the main North American retreat for Chinmaya Mission for its various camps. Sandeepany also uses this ashram to conduct camps and retreats for kids, college students, parents and others.

Major festivals are also celebrated at Sandeepany throughout the year. These functions are open to the public.

CMSJ currently runs two regular programs to serve the community. The first is a hot lunch program for a homeless shelter in San Jose, which has been done for the past 4-5 years. Adult members as well as teenagers in the Yuva Kendra classes have been volunteering for this program, in which CMSJ cooks and serves a vegetarian meal for the 50-70 homeless people staying in the shelter. This shelter houses families as well as single adults. About 10-15 volunteers are needed to handle this task. This is a great way for CMSJ to give back to the community and is much appreciated by the staff running the shelter.

The second is a bag lunch program run from the Hillview Community Center in Los Altos. The Sandwich Bag program is targeted for Yuvakendra (14 yrs & above). CMSJ members have been doing this monthly for the past three years, preparing sandwich bags (approximately 80 bags or 160 sandwiches) and delivering them to the Julian Inn in San Jose. Youth volunteers will receive community service credit. CMSJ members are encouraged to take advantage of these opportunities to volunteer their time for this community service. They can also sponsor this event. 🙏

HINDUISM: Did You Know?

- Hindus, mostly as a habit rather than because of conscious reflection, venerate the cow in India. The cow is revered because of its role in agriculture in India, and its close association with the earth, which Hindus also revere as sacred.
- Hindu use of anthropomorphic and abstract representations of deities is not idolatry in the strict sense. The image itself is not worshiped, but rather it represents or contains the divinity during the period of worship.
- Hinduism is not a “congregational” religion, however Hindus do gather for special celebrations at Hindu centers across the U.S. California is home to about 26 Hindu centers.
- Caste still exists in India today, and while it still influences marriage, as many marriages continue to be arranged, it does not play as prevalent a role in Hindu or Indian life as it has in the past. Attitudes about caste are changing, even as abuses continue to exist. Caste maintains its greatest influence in rural villages, where life remains more tied to old conceptions of hierarchy.
- The symbol for Hinduism is the character “OM” or “AUM” which is the sound of the heart of the cosmos.

STUDY QUESTIONS

After reading the section on Hinduism, read and reflect on the following questions. Record your answers.

1. What did you learn about Hinduism that surprised you?
2. Reflect on Swami Vedananda’s description of the eternal as ‘the sun reflected in many dewdrops,’ and on the background reading on Hinduism. Would you describe Hinduism as a polytheistic (many gods) or monotheistic (one god) faith?
3. How easy or difficult might it be for Hindus living in the U.S. to live out the Hindu stages of life, with their appropriate behaviors and goals? Explain your answer.
4. What similarities do you see between Hinduism and your own faith? What differences do you see between Hinduism and your faith?
5. Do you agree or disagree with the Hindu belief in the law of karma? Why or why not?
6. What questions remain?



Photographs by Jerry Berndt, courtesy of the USC Center for Religion and Civic Culture.

SESSION 2 - JUDAISM

SESSION PLAN

Participants will come to the session having read the background piece (pages 14-17) on Judaism. By the end of this session participants will:

- ✓ Understand something about the history, traditions, beliefs and practices of Judaism.
- ✓ Reflect on the experiences of Jews in the United States and California.
- ✓ Begin to consider ways to promote understanding by building bridges with diverse Jewish congregations in their own communities.

Gathering and Introduction 5 minutes

Arrange seating in a circle. Open with prayer, meditation or a moment of silence. Ask each person to introduce him or herself.

Reading Review 10 minutes

Review the reading and study questions using the review outline. Allow time for participants to ask additional questions. Suggest they research the answers and bring them to the next class.

Activity – Group Discussion 15 minutes

Divide the participants into 4 groups. Ask each to choose a recorder and a timekeeper. Each group will take a different branch of Judaism, Orthodox, Conservative, Reconstructionist and Reform, and will consider it while describing life in the U.S. for that group. Use the following subjects to consider the experiences of each group. Ask them to record their answers (use flip chart paper if available, and post around the room).

1. Raising and educating children.
 2. Practicing their faith (including diet, observance of holidays and rituals, and personal acts of devotion).
 3. Being a minority faith in a nation with a majority faith.
- Share with the entire group if time allows.

Video Segment 10 minutes

The video companion piece on Judaism is about 10 minutes long. Play this through for the group, asking them to pay special attention to the model of community involvement and the viewpoints of youth.

Discussion of the Video 5 minutes

Arrange the groups in dyads (twos). Ask them to list their favorite examples of community involvement in the reading, video, and from the youth interview, and why. Share some of these with the entire group.

Assignments 5 minutes

Ask each participant to come up with two ideas about how their congregation could build bridges with Jews in their community. If they are not aware of Jews in their local area, ask if someone might be willing to research whether there are any Jewish groups in the area. If there seem to be none, ask the group to consider how they might promote respect and understanding of Judaism in their congregation.

Closing 5 minutes

Ask participants to complete the sentence “A new insight I received today is...” Close with a simple prayer.

REVIEW OUTLINE

- The Hebrew people originated with Abraham about 1850 BCE, and the Jewish religious traditions began with Moses about 1250 BCE.
- Since there is no word for “religion” or “Judaism” in Hebrew, Judaism is understood as the civilization and way of life of the Jewish people.
- Judaism is usually the religion identified with the emergence of monotheism, the belief in one God.
- Judaism is a literary and legal tradition characterized by the evolving nature of the relationship between the Jewish people and God. To be the “chosen people” means to have special responsibilities because of this relationship.
- The most important holy day for Jews is the Sabbath.
- There are four branches of Judaism: Orthodox, Conservative, Reform and Reconstructionist. They are separated by their various responses to the encounter of Judaism with the modern world.
- The sacred writings of Judaism include the Hebrew Bible, Talmud and the Kabbalah.
- All Jewish holidays occur on a lunar calendar, changing their dates from year to year, and they all begin at sundown.
- The first woman rabbi was ordained in 1972 by the Reform tradition.

INTRODUCTION TO JUDAISM

Judaism as a religious tradition began about 1250 BCE with Moses, who was commanded by God to lead the Hebrew slaves out of Egypt, and with whom God established a covenant on Mt. Sinai. The Hebrew people, however, originated with the patriarch Abraham about 600 years earlier. Though often identified as a “western” religion along with Christianity and Islam, Judaism originated in the Middle East. The earliest Hebrews were originally nomadic people who later became agricultural. The religion of Israel is the covenant with the One God, known as “adonai” or “elohim”, who is revealed through the teaching of the patriarchs and matriarchs of Israel, and is documented in the 22 books of the Hebrew Bible.

After the destruction of the temple in Jerusalem in 70 CE, Judaism became separated from its central worship site and the priesthood lost its function and authority. The study of God’s teachings and the observance of God’s commandments replaced the temple as synagogues spread all over the world, in spite of widespread discrimination.

Judaism today is a complex worldwide tradition that is more simply understood as a civilization and the way of life of the Jewish people. There is no word in Hebrew for “religion” or “Judaism.” This indicates that as a way of life, Judaism encompasses the cultural, social and religious history of a broad, diverse and widespread community, some of whom do not consider themselves religious.

BELIEFS and PRACTICES

Judaism is based upon belief in the one God (monotheism) who made a covenant with Israel to be the people who would carry on an ethical and religious lifestyle that is spelled out in the Torah (the first five books of the Hebrew Bible). Judaism is often conceptualized as a triangle comprised of: the Jewish People; the Torah; and the land of Israel at the points, with God at the center. Judaism has no creed as such, but rather emphasizes living according to the commandments in the Torah, or more generally, living an ethical life. Judaism is therefore an evolving relationship of the Jewish people with God, and a literary and legal tradition. Jewish faith is perhaps best expressed in these words from Deuteronomy 6:4 “Hear, O Israel, the Lord is OUR God, the Lord alone.” These words are repeated several times each day in Jewish worship services.

Among the practices of Jews is “keeping *kosher*”, which means to follow dietary rules first laid out in the Torah. Some kosher restrictions include not consuming meat and dairy at the same meal, no pork products, shellfish or meat-eating animals are to be consumed, and only meat prepared under rabbinical supervision is permitted. Not all Jews follow this system, but those who strictly observe these laws eat only in kosher homes and restaurants.

Jewish males are circumcised on the eighth day after birth, which is a sign of the covenant with God. Many Jews also participate in a naming ceremony for baby girls.

Initiation into adulthood is accomplished by a ceremony known as the *Bar* (son) or *Bat* (daughter) *Mitzvah* (of the commandment). The ceremony takes place at the age of 13 for boys and 12-13 for girls, and consists of the initiate conducting a synagogue service, including reading a portion of the Torah in Hebrew. Festive celebrations with gifts for the initiate follow the service.

The most important holy day for Jews is the Sabbath, which begins at sundown on Friday and ends at sundown on Saturday. A special meal begins the holy day. During this period, workday activities are ceased for many Jews, and Orthodox Jews in particular avoid operating electrical machinery, including driving a car or using the telephone. Special Sabbath synagogue services are attended on Friday night and/or Saturday morning. Jews are not divided into denominations, but there are branches of Jewish life, which respond in different ways to the encounter of Judaism with the modern world.

Orthodox Jews, the most traditional of these groups, adhere strictly to Halakhah (Jewish law). Orthodox Jewish men wear a small skullcap called a *yarmulke*, which signifies respect for the presence of God. A recognizable subgroup of Orthodox Jews is the Hasidim whose men dress in black suits and hats, and wear beards. Orthodox Jews account for about 7 percent of all Jews in the United States.

Conservative Jews are more willing than the Orthodox to reinterpret Halakhah to respond to changing modern conditions. They are, however, still quite observant of dietary laws and keeping the traditional Sabbath observances. They account for about 43 percent of American Jews.

Reconstructionists are an offshoot of Conservatism, but see Judaism as a culture or “civilization,” rather than simply as a religion. They are open to broader views of God, and reject the notion of Jews as a chosen people. Less than 2 percent of practicing Jews in the United States are Reconstructionists, but their numbers are growing.

Reform Judaism is the most liberal branch. It does not require keeping Kosher, observing Sabbath restrictions or other traditional practices of the kind. Reform Jews place ethical conduct at the center of religious life, and see the Bible as a document of human origin, which each individual must study to determine what God’s demand is upon him or her. About 35 percent of practicing United States Jews are Reform.

SACRED BOOKS/SCRIPTURES

The sacred writings of the Jewish people include the Hebrew Bible, which consists of three parts: the Torah (five books of Moses), the Prophets (Joshua, Isaiah, Jeremiah, etc.) and the Writings (Psalms, Proverbs, Book of Job, etc.). The Christian Old Testament contains the same books, but Jews reject this name for the text, as it would imply acceptance of the New Testament, which is exclusive to Christianity.

The Talmud, second in importance only to the Bible, is a vast and complex document that is an interpretation of Jewish law and lore, and has been a tremendous influence in the life of Judaism over the centuries.

There is also a continual mystical tradition in Judaism known as the *Kabbalah* or “the received” tradition. It teaches the experience of communion with God, and about how the cosmos is maintained through the covenant interaction between God and humanity.

RITUALS AND CELEBRATIONS

All of the Jewish holidays occur on a lunar calendar, so their dates are different from year to year. Among all of the Jewish holidays, four have the most impact upon American Jews:

Rosh HaShanah (The Jewish New Year). While also a time of rejoicing, this holiday begins a ten-day period of reflection on how one has lived over the past year. Celebrated in September/October.

Yom Kippur (The Day of Atonement). Celebrated ten days after the New Year, this holiday includes a 25-hour fast from all food and drink while Jews spend time in prayer and reflection.

Hanukkah. Celebrated in December and lasting for eight days, this is Judaism’s Festival of Lights, commemorating the rededication of the Temple in Jerusalem in 165 BCE after a severe religious persecution. During this time, the miraculous event in which the temple sanctuary light kept burning for eight days without having enough oil for even one day is remembered. Candles are lit each night of the

celebration also to remind the faithful that the light of Judaism kept glowing because of Jews who refused to abandon their faith.

Passover. This holiday commemorates the Hebrews’ Exodus, or escape, from Egypt, and occurs in March/April. No food containing leavened products is eaten during the eight days of Passover. An elaborate ritual meal is eaten during this holiday, which is known as the *Seder* meal.

Other holiday observances include Sukkot (the Feast of Tabernacles) occurring in September/October, and Shavuot (the Feast of Weeks) in May/June. All Jewish holidays begin at sundown the evening before most western calendars indicate the start of the holiday.

ROLES OF WOMEN

The history of Judaism is peppered with stories about strong and faithful Jewish women whose acts of heroism for the faith are revered. At the same time, Jewish texts also contain stories of emotional pain, rape and murder of women.

In more recent history Jewish women have played a central and important role in providing needed services to their community. In the United States, for example, Jewish women organized the National Council of Jewish Women in the 1890s to give them a way to serve their communities, lobby for social issues, and educate themselves about Judaism and Jewish history. And Jewish women established America’s first Zionist organization, Hadassah, in 1912 to care for Jewish children being born in Palestine.

However, until the 20th century, Jewish women’s religious roles were relegated to the domain of the home. It was 1954 before Conservative Judaism allowed women to recite the blessing over the Torah, and to be included in the *minyan* (quorum of 10 required for public prayer). Beginning in the 1970s, in Reform and Conservative Judaism both boys and girls could receive the same religious education, and by 1972 the first woman, Sally Priesand, was ordained as a Reform rabbi. ☞

JUDAISM – Did You Know?

- Nearly 6 million Jews reside in the United States. 39% of Jewish congregations in the U.S are Orthodox, 29% are Reform, and 32% are Conservative. Many Orthodox synagogues are quite small. So although one-third of all congregations are Orthodox, they still account for less than ten percent of all American Jews.
- Jews do not accept Jesus of Nazareth as their messiah because 1) his followers claimed he was a divine being, which is contrary to Jewish religious belief; and 2) they do not see Jesus’ coming as ushering in the period of peace and justice, and an end to the persecution of the Jews that they associate with the messiah’s arrival.

- Jews who have converted to Christianity and have joined groups such as Jews for Jesus, Messianic Jews, Hebrew Christians and similar groups are not seen as Jewish, although their right to practice their religion freely is, of course, respected.
- Jewish understanding of the role of “chosen people” is not about superiority, but about special obligations and responsibilities. They view themselves as having a mission to live a monotheistic and ethical life.
- One important symbol of Judaism is the six pointed Star of David, which Jews in Nazi Germany were forced to wear for identification purposes. It has been linked to King David’s Shield, and scholars have attributed theological significance to the design.

PERSONAL FOCUS

Rabbi Susan Laemmle is Dean of Religious Life at the University of Southern California

"...During the time following 9/11 the Psalms were helpful scriptures – in particular, Psalm 121. During times of great stress and turmoil in history we find the Psalms meaningful because they were written during periods of difficulty, and give voice to the sense of doubt and struggle that people of faith experience..."

"...Immediately after 9/11 we here at the University hastily put together an interfaith prayer service. It was important that this service be interfaith, as opposed to multi-faith. There are times when interfaith expressions are best for the overall community. In this instance, we needed for individuals to express their respective faith in such a way that the whole congregation would be comfortable..."

"... There are also times when it is important to have multi-faith experiences. I think this is the way of the future as we seek to build bridges and truly understand not only faith traditions of others, but also our own. Many times interfaith experiences can be boring and not real. We tend to be on our best behavior in interfaith settings, for fear that honesty and openness can lead to dissension. And sometimes it can. But in life we can't just look for the sweetness and light. We must set common ground rules and be willing to take risks. When different religious groups come together in an uncompromising way, we want to experience them as they are, learn about each other, and through that learning understand more about our own faith. This is the electrifying potential of multifaith experiences. Productive interfaith and multifaith work acknowledges the incalitrance of the world's difficulties and reminds us that we must face these difficulties and find ways to deal with them..."

"...Being on a college campus makes one optimistic. Having experienced personal pain and struggle, as we all do, I have found it hard not become disillusioned. But college students are coming to life fresh. Even if they have the sense that we are living in dangerous times, that there is indeed evil in the world, they have a natural energy and optimism about the world and its future. For religion to be an important part of the lives of young people, we must continually update our practices and rituals to be timely and appropriate..."

"...the experience of 9/11 reminds us of what really matters – our human relationships, our inner life. We need each other; we need to share our fears with each other. We must work together, love each other, care for each other." 🌱

COMMUNITY FOCUS

Kehillat Israel, Pacific Palisades

We at Kehillat Israel don't ask primarily for a financial pledge of our members on the High Holy Days. Instead, every year at Yom Kippur we pass out a Tikun Olam Pledge Card, asking for a commitment to social justice and outreach efforts during the coming year. In this way we support a number of programs and services in which we live out our faith in ethical and social action."

Rabbi Steven Carr Reuben leads Kehillat Israel, the largest Reconstructionist Congregation in the world. The congregation describes itself as "an inclusive spiritual Jewish community, providing a warm, nurturing environment where we pray, learn, educate and perpetuate Torah and Jewish values while serving the greater community."

Serving the greater community is a central focus of Kehillat Israel. Rabbi Reuben describes it this way: "we are compelled by Jewish tradition to bring holiness into the world, to be co-partners with God in completing the act of creation. There is a saying in the Talmud: for a synagogue to be kosher, it must have a window. What that means is that what you do inside of the synagogue only matters if you take it outside as well. Faith is not a self-contained experience. We must fulfill our spiritual obligation as God's partners by acting on our faith and bringing forth justice."

The congregants of Kehillat Israel bring forth justice through *Tikun Olam* (healing the world) task forces, which range from supporting the Palisades CROP walk, serving dinner at Santa Monica's Turning Point Shelter, or providing hope and comfort to the families at the Tiverton House at UCLA Medical Center; to working on projects through the Environmental Task Force, the downtown Chrysalis Center; and planning *Mega Mitzvah* Day in conjunction with organizations across the greater LA area. The methodology of using task forces is important, according to Rabbi Reuben. "Before, we used to have a social action committee, which would spend most of its time in deciding what to do. We have gotten away from asking people to make open-ended commitments to be on a committee. Instead, we ask them to focus their involvement to a particular cause or project. And they will, for they will either find it meaningful and go beyond their original commitment or they will fulfill their pledge to a given cause. Either way, the task forces have a baseline of support for their efforts."

Kehillat Israel has had a long-standing partnership with the Abundance of Christ Church in South Central Los Angeles. Their relationship began in 1991 and was cemented during the 1992 civil uprising. The two congregations have a yearly pulpit exchange, joint social events, and youth events. "Two cultures, one heart" is how the two congregations define their common bond. This week's Torah portion is from Deuteronomy, which says that justice you shall pursue. That's our sense of mission. We are fulfilling a spiritual mandate of Jewish tradition to bring forth justice." 🌱

STUDY QUESTIONS

After reading the section on Judaism, read and reflect on the following questions. Record your answers.

1. One of the young people in the video on Judaism commented on the need to update rituals to ensure they relate to modern life. Judaism practices rites of initiation into adulthood for both boys and girls (Bar and Mat Mitzvah). Given what you know about this rite, how might it be relevant to preparing young children for adulthood?
2. Jews and Christians share some common religious heritage. However, some Jewish people have strong concerns about the separation between church and state in the U.S. Explain why this may be the case.
3. What did you learn about Judaism that surprised you?
4. *Israel* is translated in the video as ‘the one who wrestles with God’. What do you understand this to mean?
5. What similarities do you see between Judaism and your own faith?
What differences do you see between Judaism and your faith?
6. What questions remain?



Photographs by Jerry Berndt, courtesy of the USC Center for Religion and Civic Culture.

SESSION 3 - BUDDHISM

SESSION PLAN

Participants will come to the session having read the background piece (pages 15-22) on Buddhism. By the end of this session participants will:

- ✓ Understand something about the history, traditions, beliefs and practices of Buddhism.
- ✓ Reflect on the experiences of Buddhists in the United States and California.
- ✓ Begin to consider ways to promote understanding by building bridges with Buddhist congregations in their own communities.

Gathering and Introduction 5 minutes

Arrange seating in a circle. Open with prayer, meditation or a moment of silence. Ask each person to introduce him or herself.

Review Reading and Study Questions 25 minutes

Spend about 5-8 minutes reviewing the reading and answering questions. Ask participants to read and answer the study questions, if they have not done so. Give them about 5 minutes to do this.

Arrange the group into smaller groupings of 3-4. Ask them to select a recorder and timekeeper. Ask small group members to share their answers to the questions from the reading. Ask them to consider what they learned from the reading, including the following:

- What was surprising to you?
- What similarities and differences did you see with your own tradition?
- What questions remain? (Ask them to have a recorder write these down, and invite participants to research the answers and bring them to the next class.)

Video Segment 10 minutes

The video companion piece on Buddhism is about 10 minutes long. Play this through for the group, asking them to pay special attention to the model of community involvement and the viewpoints of the caregivers, keeping in mind the conversations they just had, and the questions that remained for them.

Discussion of the Video 10 minutes

Arrange the groups in dyads (twos). Ask them to list the challenges to Buddhists living in California and the U.S. that they saw in the video. Share some of these with the entire group. Reflect also on the caregiving offered by the Zen Hospice as an outgrowth of their religious practices.

Assignments 5 minutes

Ask each participant to come up with two ideas about how their congregation could build bridges with Buddhists in their community. If they are not aware of Buddhists in their local area, ask if someone might be willing to research whether there are any Buddhist groups in the area. If there seem to be none, ask the group to consider how they might promote respect and understanding of Buddhism in their congregation.

Closing 5 minutes

Ask participants to complete the sentence "A new insight I received today is..." Close with a simple prayer.

REVIEW OUTLINE

- The founder/originator of Buddhism is Siddhartha Gautama, a sixth century BCE Indian prince.
- Buddhism grew out of Gautama's encounters with human suffering, and his search to end suffering.
- To become a Buddhist one must only "take refuge" in the three "jewels" of Buddhism: the Buddha, the teaching or Dharma, and the community or Sangha.
- The reality of suffering is explained by the Four Noble Truths: 1) all humanity experiences suffering, 2) suffering originates in desire or grasping, 3) suffering can be escaped by ending attachments and desire, 4) the Eightfold Path is the way to escaping suffering.
- The Eightfold Path has eight steps: 1) right views, 2) right intention, 3) right speech, 4) right action, 5) right career, 6) right effort, 7) right mindfulness, 8) right concentration.
- For Buddhists, even that which we call our "self" is impermanent and in flux.
- Enlightenment comes as a result of traveling the Eightfold Path, and practicing mind-centering meditation, which leads to insight about the true nature of things. *Nirvana* is the transcendence of suffering.
- Buddhism has many sacred writings, the oldest compositions written in Sanskrit and called *Sutras*.
- Although Buddhism originated in India, it has flourished all over the Far East, especially in China and Japan.
- Many, perhaps even most, Buddhists would call Buddhism a philosophy rather than a religion, as it is more of a prescription for living a peaceful life free of suffering than a path to salvation.

INTRODUCTION TO BUDDHISM

Buddhism arises out of the experiences of a man named Siddhartha Gautama who was born to a king or chieftain in India in the sixth century BCE. He is said to have left his home and family, renouncing his birthright, wife and infant son, to become a wandering ascetic in search of ultimate truth. According to legend, his search was motivated by encounters with suffering, disease, old age and death. Gautama set out to seek the answer to why we suffer in this human life. Through the insight he gained from his search and through deep meditation, he became known as the Buddha, or “Enlightened One.”

BELIEFS

The teachings of the Buddha, which were not written down until nearly three centuries after his death, center on the nature of suffering and how to end it. Although written long after the Buddha lived, there is a great deal of certainty that the basic teachings, the Four Noble Truths and the Eightfold Path, were his original teachings. Buddhism is often called a “middle path, steering a middle course between asceticism and hedonism”. One formally becomes a Buddhist by “taking refuge” in the three “jewels”: the Buddha, the Enlightened One; the Dharma, or teaching; and the Sangha, or community. As he lay dying, the Buddha exhorted his followers to diligently work out their own salvation, characterizing this path as one of individual emancipation and then of others.

The Four Noble Truths explain the reality of suffering: 1) all of humanity experiences suffering in many forms including the physical, mental and existential (i.e., birth, aging, disease, death, separating from loved ones, meeting up with people one doesn’t like); 2) suffering originates in a desire for or grasping after experiences, pleasure, continued existence, and even annihilation; 3) we can escape suffering by following a path designed to end these attachments; and 4) the path the Buddha taught to escape suffering is the Eightfold Path.

The Eightfold Path is divided into three groupings: cultivating insight, cultivating morality, and cultivating the mind through meditation. The first two steps – *right views* and *right intention* – reflect the cultivation of insight and wisdom. The next three steps – *right speech*, *right action* and *right career* – reflect the cultivation of morality, and the last three – *right effort*, *right mindfulness* and *right concentration* – reflect the cultivation of the mind. As a result of this approach – one of diagnosing humanity’s ailment and providing the cure – adherents often speak of Buddhism more as a philosophy of life than as a religion in the traditional sense.

Although the Buddha incorporated the doctrines of *karma*, *reincarnation* and the existence of some of the deities of Hinduism, he rejected other elements of the religion. He rejected specifically the rituals described in the *Vedas*, as well as the caste system, challenging the very basis of Hindu society.

However, the most revolutionary aspect of the Buddha’s teaching was in his rejection of Hindu ideas pertaining to the Self and Brahman. Hinduism teaches that the Self (not the personality) is the permanent, unchanging life force that is the source of ultimate knowledge for the individual. Brahman is the permanent, unchanging transcendent Supreme Reality in the universe which lies beyond the cosmos, and is its source. Humanity’s goal is to be released from the cycle of birth and death and for the Self to merge with Brahma.

Buddhism, in contrast, teaches that everything in the material and mental realms, including what we call our “self”, is constantly in flux and impermanent. Our suffering therefore arises out of our grasping to hold onto that which is impermanent – an impossible task. We constantly desire things we do not possess, or worry about losing the things we do possess. As the Eightfold Path teaches, meditation is the primary practice that overcomes this human delusion by calming the mind and revealing the nature of things as they truly are. As one gains this insight, the ultimate breakthrough occurs which is called *Nirvana* – the transcendence of all grasping, attachment rooted in desire, greed, hatred, and delusion.

Because these practices are time-consuming and can require a great deal of instruction and guidance, early Buddhism was and Theravada Buddhism (in South and Southeast Asia) still is more of a monastic religion than one of the masses. In these areas, the Sangha (community of monks and nuns) is more expected to attain the goals set forth by the Buddha than the lay community. Western Buddhists, Pure Land and Mahâyâna Buddhists engage in various practices with a broad range of beliefs about death, enlightenment and living out the Eightfold Path.

SACRED BOOKS/SCRIPTURE

Buddhism’s sacred writings are composed in many languages and are vast in number. Originating in what has become Theravada Buddhism, the Pâli canon is the oldest surviving collection. The earliest compositions in this canon are called *suttas* (*sutras* in Sanskrit), and are usually based upon the words of the Buddha, but some are from his disciples. The canon was written down in the first century BCE in Sri Lanka, and included a later section added to the *suttas* analyzing the teachings in the earlier compositions.

The Pâli canon is divided into “baskets” (*pitakas*). Rules for monks and nuns are found in the Vinaya Pitaka; the Sutta Pitaka contains the teaching of the Buddha; and the commentaries discuss the *suttas* analytically in the Abhidhamma Pitaka.

Other authoritative and influential texts came from the Mahâyâna and Vajrayâna Buddhist traditions. Known as *suttas* from the Sanskrit, and believed to be the Buddha’s own words, the first Mahâyâna *sûtras* appeared in the first century BCE, and continued to be written until the

eight century CE. Some of the most prominent include the Wisdom Sūtras, with longer and shorter versions such as the Diamond and Heart Sūtras, the Lotus Sūtras and the Pure Land Sūtras. The Vajrayāna tradition appeared with new texts dating from the sixth century CE that were known as *tantras* (systems) and esoteric ritual texts.

PRACTICES, RITUALS and FESTIVALS

Although meditation is the principal practice of most Buddhists, it is not universal. The Pure Land School of Buddhism, for example, emphasizes faith as well as the recitation of a formula that will gain practitioners rebirth into the Western Paradise or Pure Land (a temporary extraterrestrial realm with no suffering leading to enlightenment).

Major Buddhist festivals and celebrations include: **Wesak** (Sri Lanka), or **Visakha Puja** (Thailand). A celebration of the birth, death and enlightenment of the Buddha. Observed on the day of the full moon in the fifth lunar month.

Asalha Puja. Held on the full moon day in seventh lunar month, this celebration commemorates the first sermon the Buddha gave to his original five disciples.

The Lantern Festival. This festival commemorates the proof that the Buddhist sūtras were genuine because they did not catch fire when burned like the scriptures of the Taoists did. Chinese and other Asians celebrate on the fifteenth day of the first lunar month. Lamps are lit to symbolize the light of Buddhism.

Obon or All Soul's Day. This ceremony, which occurs on the fifteenth day of the seventh lunar month (July or August) serves to honor and remember ancestors. It is based on the story of the Buddha's awakened disciple (Maudgalyāyana) and his rescue of his mother in hell. Lanterns are usually placed on small boats and set adrift on a body of water. Obon festivals at Japanese Buddhist temples are now a popular event of the entire community in many parts of the U.S.

New Year's Day. Chinese, Vietnamese and some Korean Buddhist communities celebrate this day according to the Chinese lunar calendar, which situates it around February. Sri Lankans, Thais, Laotians, Burmese and Cambodians celebrate the New Year according to a different calendar which places the day on the 13th or 14th of April. It is considered a good day to perform acts of merit.

BRANCHES OF BUDDHISM and WOMEN'S ROLES IN BUDDHISM

It is clear that women were among the Buddha's early followers and supporters. Their roles in the tradition vary according to the branch with which they are associated.

Buddhism is identified today according to three traditions often referred to as "vehicles" (yāna).

Theravāda (the teaching of the elders) practices, the dominant form of Buddhism in South Asia (Sri Lanka) and Southeast Asia (Myanmar [Burma], Thailand, Cambodia and

Laos), focus on monastic life. Lay Buddhists earn "merit" toward future enlightenment through giving gifts of food and other necessities to support monks. Nuns do exist, but are not formally ordained. They are known as "precept holders", and are independent or attached to monasteries.

Mahāyāna (the Greater Vehicle) Buddhism appeared around the first century BCE. The concept of the Bodhisattva (one who, rather than pursuing one's own Nirvana, continues to work for the salvation of all beings) originated in this branch of Buddhism. The emphasis here is on saving others rather than oneself, and more importance is placed on the practice of compassion. Full ordination of women is practiced. In Japan, where Zen Buddhism is one of the main schools along with Pure Land and Nichinan branches, nuns enjoy a higher status and better education, and may become Zen *roshis* (priests). Females Zen priests are relatively common in United States Zen communities.

Vajrayāna (the Diamond Vehicle) Buddhism appeared around 500 CE in India with the introduction of books known as *tantras*. It later spread to Tibet, Nepal, Mongolia, China and Japan. It emphasizes ritual and mystical means to enlightenment. Vajrayāna devotees attain enlightenment through the use of *mantras* (sacred language), *mudras* (hand gestures) and *mandalas* (symbolic models of the cosmos). Novice ordination of women has been generally practiced until recently when full ordination began to be introduced. 🙏

BUDDHISM – Did You Know?

- A wheel with eight spokes, the Dharma Wheel, most often represents Buddhism, signifying the Eightfold Path.
- There are over 300 million Buddhists in the world, and numbers range from 500,000 to 5 million in the United States.
- One third of California's 200 Buddhist Centers are clustered in Los Angeles, San Francisco and Berkeley.
- Buddhism disappeared from its birthplace in India by the end of the 13th century due to repeated waves of various foreign invasions, leading ultimately to the conquest of India by groups unified under Islam.



Photographs by Jerry Berndt, courtesy of the USC Center for Religion and Civic Culture.

PERSONAL FOCUS

The Rev. Kusala, (Thich Tam-Thien) is an American born Bhikshu (monk) ordained in the Zen Tradition of Vietnam. Rev. Kusala is the Buddhist chaplain for the University Religious Conference at UCLA, and the Buddhist ride-along chaplain for the Garden Grove Police Department. He is president of the Interfaith Council of Garden Grove, Stanton and Westminster.

"...The experience of 9/11 is an example of the first noble truth: that life is ultimately unsatisfactory. What that means is life is ever changing and impermanent; because of that impermanence all the good things we cling to are eventually taken away. There is an ever-changing flow of ego and attachment. We want to be in control of our life, of our destiny, and of our community; but when we look carefully there's no "I" in charge, there's no essence behind the illusion of "Self". That fact, along with impermanence fills our life with suffering..."

"...Post 9/11 we held a memorial service at the International Buddhist Meditation Center for all those people who lost their lives. During those same weeks I was giving many presentations at high schools and colleges about fear. The students were unsure about the future, just as the adults were. Everyone was really afraid. The message I gave them was this: nobody knows what happens next. The only thing we're sure of is- because of birth, death is soon to follow. But we don't know when death will knock at our door, so get up each morning an hour early, and live it like the last day of your life. Be mindful of every moment, each thing you do, do it like it's the first time, make the most of it. If we don't we allow fear to take us over, we can't become its tool..."

"...In Garden Grove we held a 9/11 memorial service where leaders of different religions got together and explain 9/11 from their individual faith tradition. It was nice to have diversity coming together in unity; the ability to find common ground. We're all human beings, no matter what our religion. God is not what we have in common; from a Buddhist point of view, suffering is..."

"...One of the most important things my presence gives to the interfaith community is in changing their comfort zone. The traditions of the book –Jewish, Christian, and Muslim – believe that everything is fine until some one from outside the book comes in. One of the things that a Buddhist does is force people of the book to re-think their position as a group. I find that groups become more mindful and more inclusive in their worldview when the "other" is present. For example, the phrase "In God We Trust" is a relative truth, when a Buddhist is in the group..."

"...To build bridges across the diversity of Buddhism in LA, we formed the Buddhist Sangha Council in 1989. It is the first permanent cross-cultural, inter-Buddhist organization in the United States, and has as its primary goals greater communication, understanding and cooperation among Buddhist Groups in Southern California. The Council is composed of ordained monks, nuns and ministers from all the major Buddhist traditions: Theravada, Mahayana and Vajrayana, and from all Buddhist ethnic origins: American, Burmese, Cambodian, Chinese, European, Japanese, Korean,

Laotian, Sri Lankan, Thai, Tibetan and Vietnamese. This Council is actively involved in a Buddhist-Catholic dialogue with the Archdiocese of Los Angeles, which is important work." 🏠

COMMUNITY FOCUS

Zen Hospice Project, San Francisco

The Zen Hospice Project in San Francisco (ZHP) grew out of the Buddhist teaching of expressing compassion in the world. Begun in the late 1980s by the Zen Center, a small monastic center on Page Street, the Hospice Project began by housing homeless terminally ill patients at the Zen Center. When the pandemic of AIDS in the late 80s and early 90s increased the community need for hospice care, the Center's focus evolved. Gradually the hospice took over the Victorian home across from the Center that had formerly served as the student housing.



Today there are five rooms upstairs that offer end-of-life care to persons across faith traditions. About 15% of the persons who are cared for at ZHP are there because of their spiritual practice. The remaining 85% are there either because they either have no economic or familial support available to them; or, the process of dying is so overwhelming to the family that additional support is needed.

ZHP volunteers found that caring for people with AIDS or cancer was, in itself, a kind of spiritual practice. Brad Byrum, the ZHP Executive Director, explains:

"The Hospice Project fits Buddhism nicely, as it cultivates a contemplative relationship with death and the impermanence of life. It is also a profound means of expressing unconditional kindness, which grows out of the sitting practice....We are not managing death, as in the traditional model of hospice care...but we seek to put death and grief in context. We all experience death, loss, and grief. One of the deepest points of intimacy in the human experience is at the point of death. At that point, I can meet and connect spiritually with anyone across lines of culture, knowledge, or faith tradition...."

"...Traditional social services have the patient in the center of a wheel, and all the supportive services the spokes of the wheel. We don't. We see all of us together on the wheel, and all of us together in the center. We are all equally important..."

(continues on page 22)

One of Zen Hospice Project's greatest strengths is its training of volunteers. Each year over 100 volunteers from a variety of faith traditions and beliefs provide an estimated 25,000 hours of practical, emotional and spiritual support to 200 individual and their families as they face death from cancer, AIDS and other illnesses. Over the years, the ZHP has served thousands and affected the care of thousands more through professional training, community caregiver workshops and other educational efforts. The Hospice is now nationally recognized as an innovative model in the movement to improve end-of-life care.

Zen Hospice Project is also an innovative model of interfaith cooperation. Brad tells of Spring 2002 when the Jewish Passover and the Christian Holy Week overlapped. "One evening I entered the house and there was a Rabbi leading a Seder in the dining room; a Catholic priest was offering the Eucharist, as it was Maundy Thursday; and the Buddhist Meditation Group was observing their regular spiritual gathering."

"Dying is not a problem to be solved," Brad reminds us. "Dying can be a domain of transformation". 🙏

STUDY QUESTIONS

1. What did you learn about Buddhism that surprised you?
2. What do you think of the Buddhist belief that all in life is impermanent, and that desire and grasping after things are at the root of all human suffering? Do you agree or disagree? Why or why not?
3. What similarities do you see between Buddhism and your own faith? What differences do you see between Buddhism and your faith?
4. The monk in the video said that recognizing preciousness and becoming aware of the Buddha nature in each of us is an aspect of enlightenment. Is there a similar belief in your faith tradition? Explain.
5. The monk in the video said that recognizing preciousness and becoming aware of the Buddha nature in all of us is an aspect of enlightenment. Is there a similar belief in your faith tradition? If so, please explain.
6. What questions remain?



Photographs by Jerry Berndt, courtesy of the USC Center for Religion and Civic Culture.

SESSION 4 - CHRISTIANITY

SESSION PLAN

Participants will come to the session having read the background piece (pages 24-27) on Christianity. By the end of this session participants will:

- ✓ Understand something about the history, traditions, beliefs and practices of Christianity.
- ✓ Reflect on the experiences of Christians in the United States and California.
- ✓ Begin to consider ways to promote understanding by building bridges with diverse Christian congregations in their own communities.

Gathering and Introduction 5 minutes

Arrange seating in a circle. Open with prayer, meditation or a moment of silence. Ask each person to introduce him or herself.

Review Reading and Study Questions 15 minutes

The leader will review the section on Christianity, asking participants to share any remaining questions from the reading. List their questions on a flip chart. If time permits, ask what parts of the reading surprised them.

Video Segment 10 minutes

The video companion piece on Christianity is about 10 minutes long. Play this through for the group, asking them to pay special attention to the models of community involvement, the viewpoints of youth, and the diversity within the Christian community. Make a list of the different Christian groups you see in the video.

Discussion of the Video 20 minutes

Christianity is the largest of the world's religions, and is found on every continent and is comprised of many denominations. Break into small groups of 3-4 and ask participants to identify a recorder and timekeeper. Discuss and answer these questions:

1. What kinds of diversity are represented in Christianity?
2. What do you think accounts for this diversity?
3. In your opinion, is diversity within Christianity a strength or a weakness? Why?

Assignments 5 minutes

Ask the group to identify the diversity within the Christian community in your area. Ask each participant to come up with two ideas about how their congregation could build bridges with Christians of all kinds in their community.

Closing 5 minutes

Ask participants to complete the sentence "A new insight I received today is..." Close with a simple prayer.

REVIEW OUTLINE

- Christianity is a worldwide and very diverse religion. Review the spread of Christianity in its early years.
- God is the creator of Heaven and Earth and Jesus Christ is one with Him in essence, being fully divine and fully human.
- The Trinity is a way of describing the one God, as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit (the Holy Spirit being with Jesus' followers in this life).
- The Christian scriptures grew out of the Hebrew Scriptures and consist of various compilations of works. Roman Catholics use the Vulgate (Latin version of the Hebrew Scriptures which includes the Apocrypha) as authoritative, Orthodox Christians use the Septuagint (Greek version, containing fewer writings from the Apocrypha), while Protestants view only the Old and New Testaments as authoritative or canonical.
- While rites and practices vary according to denomination, the vast majority of Christians observe two sacraments, baptism with water and the Lord's Supper or Holy Communion/Eucharist.
- The three major divisions in Christianity are Roman Catholic, Orthodox, and Protestant, with Protestantism having many smaller divisions called denominations.
- The role of women in Christianity has always been strong and important, but it is only fairly recently that women have been admitted into positions of official leadership.



Photographs by Jerry Berndt, courtesy of the USC Center for Religion and Civic Culture.

INTRODUCTION TO CHRISTIANITY

Christianity is a worldwide faith comprised of many branches with a common source. This common source is within the birth, life, teachings, acts, death and resurrection of Jesus, whom Christians call the Christ (Messiah).

Jesus was born in Roman-occupied Palestine about 2,000 years ago. He was a Jew living in a Jewish land later renamed Palestine by the Romans after the destruction of the Jewish Temple in 70 C.E. Jesus began teaching and healing in a ministry that lasted about three years, with a message of justice and love, and of turning toward God. He taught that the Kingdom of God was one in which there would be no barriers between humans: no Jews or Greeks, no male or female, no slaves or free. Because the Romans feared that as his following grew he might lead a revolt against them, the Romans arrested and crucified Jesus. At that time, various sects within Judaism competed for believers. Jewish leaders who disagreed with Jesus' approach probably cooperated with the Romans in bringing charges against Jesus. After his death, his Christian followers claimed that he had been resurrected from the dead and had appeared to some of them.

Though the earliest Christians were Jews, the apostle Paul, and other followers began to spread the teachings of Jesus to the non-Jewish population of the Greco-Roman world. The small band of followers was sufficiently inspired by their spiritual experience that Christianity quickly created many communities of faith in the Mediterranean world, and eventually the entire world. Christianity spread throughout the Hellenistic world and to India in the first three centuries, and from the fourth to seventh centuries throughout continental Europe, south in Africa into Ethiopia and Nubia. In the seventh century it was planted in China, and in the tenth century Russia became Christian.

Today one third of the world's people call themselves Christian, the largest of the world's religions. Christianity is characterized by extraordinary diversity and is now growing most rapidly in Africa and Latin America, where we find the majority of the world's Christians.

BELIEFS

Christianity's chief proclamation is that Jesus is the Messiah first foretold in Judaism. He is seen as God's son who was sent to redeem humankind from its sinful condition. Jesus' teachings were based upon love, not law. Humans can be redeemed by faith in Jesus Christ, loving one another and living a life exemplifying the gifts of the Holy Spirit: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness and faithfulness.

Jesus is at once fully divine and fully human. In his divinity, he is one in essence with God the Father, the God of the Jewish people. God is almighty and the creator of heaven and earth.

When Jesus ascended to heaven after his resurrection, he left the Holy Spirit to be with his followers. The Holy Spirit is said to be co-equal with Jesus and God the Father, sharing the divine essence. This triune relationship within the Godhead is called the Trinity (Father, Son and Holy Spirit). Just as in other faith traditions, great diversity exists in what is deemed central to the Christian gospel. There are Christians who hold a more traditional belief that at some point Jesus will return to judge

all humankind. Those who are redeemed will live eternally in heaven, and those who are not will be condemned to hell. Many Christians today have reinterpreted those traditional views of judgement, heaven and hell, placing the emphasis on Christ's life-giving redemptive work.

SACRED BOOKS/ SCRIPTURE

The earliest Christians were Jews; the Hebrew Scriptures were their sacred writings. Modern Christians still so regard them, calling them the Old Testament or First Testament, including them in the Christian Bible.

The scriptures were known in the days of the early church both in the Hebrew language, in a shorter canon of writings, and in the Greek language, in a version called the Septuagint, used by Jews in the Hellenistic world. The Septuagint included an additional group of writings, produced not long before Christ or around his lifetime, which have become known as the Apocrypha. Christians mostly used the Septuagint version. When Western Christians translated the Bible into Latin, (a version called the Vulgate, which is still the authoritative version of the Bible for Catholics) they included the Apocrypha. Today Roman Catholics, Anglicans, and other non-Protestants still include most of the Apocrypha in their sacred scriptures, and the Orthodox churches include somewhat fewer writings from the Apocrypha. At the time of the 16th century Reformation, however, Protestants made a sharp distinction between the authoritative writings in a shorter Hebrew canon and the Apocrypha, which they saw as useful but not canonical, not part of the sacred scriptures.

For the first four centuries of the Christian church's life, a New Testament canon of Christian writings came to be generally accepted and was added to the Hebrew scriptures to form the Christian Bible. The New Testament consists of 27 books: four Gospels ("good news" - accounts of Jesus' life, death, resurrection, and teachings), one historical book called the Acts of the Apostles; one "apocalyptic" writing called Revelation; and 21 letters to churches, more than half attributed to the apostle Paul. There are no writings by Jesus himself.

PRACTICES and CELEBRATIONS

The vast majority of Christians celebrate two rituals or sacraments: baptism with water (the rite marking entry into the religious community), and the Lord's Supper/Holy Communion/Eucharist (consuming bread and wine, which are understood in various ways to represent the presence of Jesus Christ), as a rite of communion with God and with all believers.

With the exception of Seventh Day Adventists, Christians hold their weekly principal worship services on Sunday, which is the day of Christ's resurrection.

The dates of the principal Christian holidays, with the exception of Advent and Christmas, are determined by a lunar calendar, so their dates vary from year to year. Orthodox Christians use a different calendar, so they observe these lunar holidays on different dates than those of Protestants and Roman Catholics.

Advent. Beginning on the Sunday nearest November 30, this is a four-week period of spiritual preparation for the advent (coming birth) of Jesus Christ.

Christmas. Celebration of the birth of Jesus on December 25. Orthodox Christians celebrate Jesus' birth on January 7.

Lent. Beginning with Ash Wednesday for Roman Catholics and Protestants, this is a 40-day period of penitence in February or March in preparation for Easter.

Good Friday (Holy Friday for Orthodox Christians). This is a commemoration of the day Jesus died by crucifixion, and it occurs two days before Easter. Many Christians attend religious services on this afternoon at about the time he is thought to have hung on the cross and died.

Easter Sunday. A celebration of the resurrection of Jesus. Based on a lunar calendar, its date varies year to year.

Ascension Day. Occurring 40 days after Easter, this is a commemoration of Jesus' ascent into heaven to sit at the right hand of God the Father.

Pentecost Sunday. This celebration marks the descent of the Holy Spirit upon Jesus' followers after his ascension. It occurs on the seventh Sunday after Easter.

MAIN SUBGROUPS

While this entire overview is meant to explain what is common to Christianity, many branches exist within the Christian community that are identified by specific interpretations, practices and additional revered texts. These include the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints, Jehovah's Witnesses and Christian Scientists. Excellent general information on these denominations can be obtained from *America's Religions: An Educator's Guide to Beliefs and Practices*, available from Teacher Ideas Press (1-800-237-6124, or www.lu.com/tip)

(Eastern) Orthodox. Originating in the Middle East, North Africa and later Eastern Europe, this traditional form of Christianity is organized along national lines (Greek Orthodox, Russian Orthodox, etc.). It sees itself as the one true, visible church (a belief also held by Roman Catholicism). Developing in the early centuries, the Orthodox church participated in the first seven ecumenical councils assembled to discuss matters of belief and practice within the entire Christian community. A schism with the Roman church developed in 1054 over several complex issues, although chief among them was the Roman Pope's claim to be head of the entire Christian church.

Roman Catholic. Beginning in Rome, claiming Peter, the disciple of Jesus, as the first Bishop of Rome, this largest branch of Christianity accepts the authority of the later Roman popes as Peter's successors. Roman Catholics share with Orthodox and Protestant Christians the basic Christian beliefs, but differ on matters of authority and governance. The Pope is revered as Christ's representative on earth, and it is believed that when he speaks *ex cathedra* (by virtue of his office) on a matter of faith or moral teaching he cannot err (papal infallibility). Among the specific practices which distinguish Roman Catholicism are that it generally requires all its priests/ministers to remain celibate, ordains no women into the priesthood, and forbids divorce under any circumstance, although annulments (declarations that no marriage ever existed) have become widespread in recent years.

Protestant. The most recent major branch of Christianity began in western Europe in the sixteenth century as a protest against perceived abuses of Roman Catholicism. It has many subdivisions, including Anglicans, Methodists, Lutherans,

Presbyterians, Baptists. Protestants share the basic Christian beliefs of Roman Catholics and Orthodox Christians, but are distinguished by such classically Protestant beliefs as:

- Salvation is received by the grace of God alone and is not dependent on human effort.
- The Bible is the sole authority for faith – not tradition or rituals.
- God is sovereign and decides who will be saved.
- All believers can have direct access to God without the mediation of priests. Though governance varies, lay people have a strong role in governance of their churches. A new Pentecostal movement has arisen within Protestantism in the 20th century which emphasizes the immediate experience of the gifts of the Holy Spirit.

ROLES OF WOMEN

Women have been a part of the Christian community from its beginning. In fact, it was women who reported Jesus' resurrection to his other followers. It seems that Jesus dealt more openly with women than was customary at the time, and his teachings, although not explicitly rejecting hierarchical family structures, suggest a spiritual equality between men and women, which was reflected in the life of the earliest Christian community.

The great example of womanhood throughout medieval Christianity was the Virgin Mary, the mother of God, an intercessor with Christ and God the Father. Women throughout Christian history have played important roles in the spiritual life of the faith.

Christian feminism since the 19th century has opened ordination as ministers to women in several Protestant denominations, Episcopalians finally approving the practice in 1976. Congregationalists, Methodists, Presbyterians, Disciples of Christ, most Lutherans, and American (Northern) Baptists all ordain women, while Roman Catholics, Orthodox Christians and most Southern Baptists (as well as some other Protestants) do not. 🏠

CHRISTIANITY – Did you know?

- While some evangelical and fundamentalist Christians use the term "Christian" to define themselves after their "born again" experience, the term Christian applies to anyone who accepts some form of the religion in any of its Orthodox, Catholic, Protestant or other expressions.
- Orthodox Christians who use "icons" in their worship, see them as symbolic representations meant to inspire their devotion to Christ, Mary and the saints. They do not worship the icons themselves.
- Of Christians living in California, 56.1%, are Roman Catholic.
- Although Roman Catholics venerate Mary as the most important of the saints, and pray to God through her, she is not considered divine herself.
- The most common symbol for Christianity is the Cross upon which Christ was crucified.

PERSONAL FOCUS

The Rev. Dr. Frank Alton is senior pastor of Immanuel Presbyterian Church, a multi-cultural and bilingual church in the heart of Los Angeles which has gained a reputation for its commitment to justice. He is a member of Bridging LA, an interfaith group born post 9/11.

"...Our congregation hosted one of the first prayer services, at noon on September 11th. We called in congregation leaders from the Wilshire Parish Association – Baptists, Disciples, Wilshire Blvd. Temple, the Islamic Center – and opened our doors to over 300 people who were seeking a place to come together, to give expression to their grief and sorrow..."

"...I think what was most important to me immediately post 9/11 was centering on the pathos of God; the anguish of a parent's heart. Since that time I have found myself in a counter cultural place. I am not in that place because of politics. Rather, it is my faith that calls me into that space, a deep and prayerful longing for us all to awaken to the need for justice..."

"...Part of Bridging LA is the spiritual practice of being in deep relationships with leaders of faith traditions other than our own. We come together, facing conflicts both within our traditions and in reaching out to others. The intentionality that comes with our commitment to each other is inspiring and hopeful. We may not change the world or even each other. But the virtue of our presence around a common table, and the honesty and love with which we conduct ourselves leads me to conclude that in our actions something, somewhere shifts in the universe and in each of us present..."

"...Our congregation is building bridges – unevenly. I am intentionally using the word unevenly, as we all need to acknowledge that inclusive and progressive congregations can encompass a range of diverse political and theological viewpoints. Part of embodying ecumenism and building bridges with interfaith partners is to practice tolerance and acceptance among and with each other..."

"...Last Holy Week we celebrated in an interfaith manner. We began on Palm Sunday night with a seder at Leo Baeck Temple. On Friday noon we held an interfaith Via Crucis procession throughout the neighborhood, with Catholic, Protestant, Buddhist and Jewish clergy in leadership..."



"...It's been a year of significant learnings. We have genuine differences. They need to be both owned and taught." 🐾

COMMUNITY FOCUS

West Side Missionary Baptist Church, West Oakland

"One night Mrs. Josie Dean, a 46-year member, invited me to a community meeting over at the Catholic Church. I said, 'Mrs. Dean, it's Bible Study night! I can't miss Bible Study!' She replied 'Pastor, you've got to be in the community so you can bring the Bible study alive!' So I went. And now there's 40 churches representing 30,000 families who have come together to rebuild our community."

So Rev. Ken Chambers begins the story of 58-year-old West Side Missionary Baptist Church in West Oakland. With just over 125 members, this dynamic congregation is leading the efforts to rebuild its community. The church has formed an economic development corporation and collaborated with for-profit and nonprofit partners to bring forth life along the 7th Street Corridor, an area devastated by the collapse of the post WWII shipping industry.

One of the most glaring needs that the community needed in the mid-90s was a grocery store. The only store in all of West Oakland, according to Rev. Chambers, "offered brown lettuce and green meat and charged the community 20% higher prices than in other parts of town." The store eventually closed; under Rev. Chamber's leadership, the West Side Economic Development Corporation and its partners leveraged \$7 million from the City of Oakland to buy the grocery store and surrounding businesses. Today the Jack London Gateway Center offers fresh food at competitive prices; a credit union has moved into the center; and a dry cleaners is nearly ready to open.

But economic development is just one part of the mission of West Side Missionary Baptist Church. They have opened a multiservice center to engage the community in a variety of soft skills training; there is a program for high-risk youth, to enhance their ability to develop their minds and hearts; the Oakland USD offers GED prep courses for high school exit exams; and a food pantry has just opened.

There is also a vision. With the help of the City of Oakland, the church has purchased property along the 7th Street corridor just across the street from a postal service processing facility that employs 8,000 people. With that property the church has the vision of retail shops on the ground floor; a new community school and community use rooms on the second floor; and affordable family housing on the third and fourth floors.

Rev. Chambers encourages other churches to claim a vision. "Read Luke 4:18. Jesus said 'The Spirit of the Lord is upon me to preach good news to the poor. Jesus led the first community economic development campaign. How else do you help the poor except through economic recovery? Churches need to have the mind to work. If you don't engage the community on some level – any level – it will affect the parishioners eventually; it will affect the church property eventually; and it will come for judgment ultimately." 🐾

STUDY QUESTIONS

After reading the section on Christianity, read and reflect upon the following questions. Record your answers.

1. What, in your own words, is the significance of Jesus being seen as both human and divine?
2. How would you describe what the various denominations and branches of Christianity have in common?

3. What did you learn that surprised you?

4. One of the people in the video says he views the importance of learning about other religions as a “responsibility.” Do you agree or disagree? Why or why not?



Photographs by Jerry Berndt, courtesy of the USC Center for Religion and Civic Culture.

5. If you are Christian, what are the specific aspects of your denomination not mentioned in the general overview of commonly held beliefs and practices? If you are not Christian, what similarities and differences do you see between Christianity and your faith?
6. What questions remain?

SESSION 5 - ISLAM

SESSION PLAN

Participants will come to the session having read the background piece (pages 29-32) on Islam. By the end of this session participants will:

- ✓ Understand something about the history, traditions, beliefs and practices of Islam.
- ✓ Reflect on the experiences of Muslims in the United States and California.
- ✓ Begin to consider ways to promote understanding by building bridges with Islamic congregations in their own communities.

Gathering and Introduction 5 minutes

Arrange seating in a circle. Open with prayer, meditation or a moment of silence. Ask each person to introduce him or herself.

Review Reading and Study Questions 10 minutes

Begin by reviewing the reading using the Islam Review Outline. Address any questions and ask participants to share any surprises and remaining questions from the background reading on Islam. Invite participants to research any unanswered questions and bring their findings to the next class.

Stereotypes and Misconceptions 15 minutes

Ask participants to think of all the stereotypes and misconceptions of Muslims that they have heard or know about. Make a list of them on a flipchart or blackboard. Ask the participants to look over the list and discuss how or whether the reading addresses each stereotype or clears up the misconceptions. Record any remaining questions for research by members of the group. Assign someone to research each one and report back the following week.

Video Segment 10 minutes

The video companion piece on Islam is about 10 minutes long. Play this through for the group, asking them to pay special attention to the model of community involvement and the viewpoints of youth, keeping in mind the conversations they just had, and the questions that remained for them.

Discussion of the Video 10 minutes

Arrange the groups in dyads (twos). Ask them to list the challenges to Muslims living in California and the U.S. that they saw in the video, and any information that relates to the stereotypes they just identified. Share some of these with the entire group.

Assignments 5 minutes

Ask each participant to come up with two ideas about how their congregation could build bridges with Muslims in their community. If they are not aware of Muslims in their local area, ask if someone might be willing to research whether there are any Islamic groups in the area. If there seem to be none, ask the group to consider how they might promote respect and understanding of Islam in their congregation.

Closing 5 minutes

Ask participants to complete the sentence “A new insight I received today is...” Close with a simple prayer.

REVIEW OUTLINE

- Islam means “peace, security and wholeness through total submission to God’s will”.
- The Prophet Muhammad recited the Qur’an, which was given to him by the archangel Gabriel (Jibril) as he meditated in a cave. It is believed by Muslims to correct all errors of translation that occurred in the Hebrew and Christian scriptures.
- Islam has a rich history of cultural, scientific and philosophical knowledge, and in fact preserved the accumulated knowledge of the western world during the dark ages.
- Muslims adhere to the Five Pillars of Islam: 1) Shahdah, or statement of faith; 2) Salat, or the five daily prayers; 3) Sawm, or fasting during the month of Ramadan; 4) Zakat, or the giving of alms; 5) Hajj, or the pilgrimage to Mecca.
- Muslims observe certain dietary restrictions such as not eating pork or drinking alcohol.
- There are three major divisions or branches of Islam: Sunni, Shi’a, and Sufis.
- Muslims revere the Prophets of Judaism and Christianity, including Moses and Jesus. They also accept the virgin birth of Jesus.
- Many customs associated with Islam are actually cultural in origin, not religiously based.
- The term “jihad” actually means to struggle in defense of the faith, or to struggle spiritually to become a better Muslim.



Photographs by Jerry Berndt, courtesy of the USC Center for Religion and Civic Culture.

INTRODUCTION TO ISLAM

Islam, which means “peace, security and wholeness through total submission to God’s will”, is the name of the religion that began around 610 CE with a series of divine revelations given to the Prophet Muhammad, which became known as the Qur’an (Al-Qur’an al-Karim, Kalam-Allah – the speech of God). Islam received its greatest momentum, however, from the Hijrah (HEEJ-rah) in 622 CE when Muhammad fled Mecca to Medina, where the Muslim community was established. For this reason, 622 CE is the year 0 in the Muslim calendar.

Muhammad was born in Mecca in 570 CE, and as a young man became known as *Al-Amin*, meaning honest and trustworthy. At the age of 25 years he married Khadijah, a well-respected business woman 15 years his senior. When he was 40 years old, and while he sat meditating in a cave, he was called by God through the angel Jibril (Gabriel) to receive the divine revelation.

After thirteen years of persecution in Mecca, Muhammad migrated to Medina, and sent missions to all the surrounding empires. The Muslim community was established in the entire Arabian Peninsula within 10 years. Following the Prophet’s death in 632 CE (10 on the Muslim calendar), the *Ummah*, or Muslim community, was first led by four Caliphs, and then by a succession of dynastic rulers. The spread of Islam and the expansion of Muslim rule changed the world map and world history. From 711 until 1492 CE, the time of the dark and Middle Ages in Europe, Muslim caliphates ruled most of the known world from Spain to Asia and Africa. Over this time, Islamic civilization provided an integration and preservation of ancient knowledge that might otherwise have been lost forever, and led world civilization in this era, known as the Golden Age.

Although the historical conflict between Islam and the West that began with the Inquisition and Crusades resulted in the disintegration of this Islamic empire, Islam continued to spread, gaining adherents. Today, Muslims are estimated to total over 1 billion worldwide.

BELIEFS and PRACTICES

Muslims are strict monotheists whose basic creed is simply “There is no god but God, and Muhammad is his Prophet.” Allah is the Arabic word for God. Muslims accept the same God as Jews and Christians, and also revere the same Biblical prophets, including Abraham, Noah, Moses, and Jesus, who they consider the word of God and a prophet, but not the divine son of God. Therefore, they declare Muhammad to be the “seal of the Prophets,” or the final prophet of God.

The six articles of faith for Muslims, found in the Qur’an and the *Sunnah* (sayings and actions of the Prophet Muhammad) are:

1. Belief in One God, who is the Unique, Infinite, Transcendent Creator and Sustainer of all that exists.
2. Belief in the eternal afterlife, which includes the end of the world, resurrection and judgment before God for one’s life, leading one to paradise or hell.

3. Belief in the unseen, be they scientific realities such as electricity, or angels, who are creatures of God and are constantly in service to Him.

4. Belief in the Books, or Revelations of God. Muslims believe God sent his message to different prophets at different times. They include the scrolls of Abraham, the Torah to Moses, the Psalms to David, and the Gospel of Jesus recorded in the New Testament, all culminating in the Qur’an which is understood by Muslims to correct human errors in the previous texts produced by translations and loss of material.

5. Belief in human messengers/prophets of God. Muslims believe that God chose certain human beings to be His messengers and to deliver his guidance by exemplifying it in their lives, and that Muhammad was God’s final Messenger.

6. Belief in the Omnipotence of God. Muslims believe that all that happens – good and evil – happens under the decree and plan of God.

The Muslim way of life is based upon the Five Pillars of Islam. The Sunnah dictates the Pillars and other practices. The Pillars are:

1. **Shahadah**, or the statement of faith: “There is no god but God, and Muhammad is His messenger.” A person becomes a Muslim by accepting and making this proclamation of faith.

2. **Salat**, or the five daily prayers that all post-pubescent male and female followers are expected to make (pre-dawn, noon, afternoon, sunset and evening).

3. **Sawm**, or fasting during the month of Ramadan. This fast includes abstaining from food, drink, and sex during the daylight hours.

4. **Zakat**, or sharing the wealth. All adults who are able are expected to make charitable donations roughly equivalent to 2.5 % of their savings.

5. **Hajj**, or the Pilgrimage to Mecca. All Muslims who are physically and financially able are expected to make a journey to this holiest of Muslim cities at least once in their lifetime. The Pilgrimage is usually made during the first 10 days of the last month of the Muslim calendar.

Muslims do not eat pork or pork products, and meat must be slaughtered according to Islamic law, similar to the Kosher requirements in Jewish law. They are also required to abstain from alcohol or other intoxicating substances. Circumcision of male children is also required.

SACRED BOOKS/SCRIPTURE

The sole scripture of Islam is called the Qur’an (less accurately spelled Koran). The Hebrew Bible and New Testament of Christianity are respected, but are seen as precursors of the Qur’an, which affirms, confirms and completes their message. Hence, the Qur’an is understood as correcting the mistakes of human error. The Qur’an is considered the literal word of God, revealed to Muhammad. The revelations were memorized and dictated by Muhammad to his disciples, who either memorized them, or in some cases, wrote them down. Zaid ibn Thabit collected all of the revelations a few years later into what is now the Qur’an. The Qur’an is written in Arabic and consists of 114 chapters or *surahs*.

The second source to which Muslims look for direction is the *Sunnah*, or sayings and deeds of the Prophet Muhammad. A narration on the *Sunnah*, called the *Hadith*, is also an important text. The most authentic source of Islam is the Qur'an. Both the Qur'an and Hadith are subject to religious evaluations on the parameters of their transmission and content. For example, Prophet Muhammad reportedly said through Hadith that statements attributed to him that contradict the Qur'an should be dismissed.

RITUALS and CELEBRATIONS

Communal worship takes place for Muslims on Fridays at noon. Muslim men are required to gather for prayer and a sermon by the *imam* (prayer leader) of the local mosque (*masjid*). Parents who must attend to infants and toddlers, and women who are on their periods are exempted.

Muslim holidays follow a lunar calendar, which is about 11 days shorter than the solar cycle, so the dates of their holidays move through in a 32-year cycle.

The two holidays observed by Muslims are:

‘Id al-Fitr (Festival Breaking the Fast). Occurs at the close of the Ramadan fast and is a time of gift giving and feasting.

‘Id al-Adha (Festival of Sacrifice). Occurs on the 10th day of the month when pilgrimages are made to Mecca, and is a period of sacrifice commemorating the willingness of Abraham to offer his son (Ishmael) to God. Muslims often sacrifice an animal on this day to mark the gift of a ram that God made to Abraham. It is also a time of gift giving, charity and hospitality. Abraham and his elder son, Ismail, built the Kaaba in Mecca, the first House of Worship to the One God (Allah) in history. Id Al-Adha comes at the end of the hajj, which brings over 1 million people to Mecca, the Kaaba and other historical sites.

MAIN SUBGROUPS

As in other traditions, a good deal of diversity exists in Islam. Below are overviews of three of the largest denominations.

Sunni. *Sunnah* in Arabic means “customary practice” or the practice of the Prophet Muhammad. Sunnis comprise about 85-90 percent of all Muslims today worldwide. They reject the idea that the Prophet’s blood descendants should inherit his authority, and instead opt for the election of their leaders, or *caliphs*.

Shi’a (or Shi’i). Shi’a in Arabic means “supporters” and refers to the supporters of the Prophet’s cousin and son-in-law, Ali. Shi’as venerate the descendants of the Prophet as imams, and believe that the last of them will return at the end of the world to redeem it. In Iran, Iraq, Bahrain and Azerbaijan, Shi’a Muslims are the majority.

Sufism. Sufi refers to a simple cloth worn by those who rejected materialism at the time that Muslim dynasties were controlling the rich resources of the world. While not technically a branch of Islam, Sufism is a mystical tradition dating from the eighth century that stresses the immanence of God and seeks intimate union with Him. They are best known by the “whirling dervishes” of Turkey, and by small Sufi communities that exist in North America.

As many as 1 million African Americans follow orthodox Islam. The Nation of Islam, which is commonly confused with orthodox Islam, is not recognized as a legitimate

Islamic group by United States Muslim authorities. Although The Nation of Islam follows most Muslim practices, such as the Five Pillars, it does not recognize the inherent equality of all peoples and races. The concept of equality before God is integral to Muslim belief, and means that anyone may become a Muslim.

THE ROLES OF WOMEN

According to many scholars of Islam and women’s roles in religion, the arrival of Islam provided women vast improvement over previous conditions. As Islam gained territory, it brought high culture, literature, science, law, philosophy and crafts, and it allowed conquered people to continue their own religious faiths.

The Qu’ran and Hadith also lay groundwork for basic rights of women, and Muhammad’s committed and compassionate life as a family man provides the example for all Muslim men. Muslim women have the right to dictate the terms of their marriage contract (marriage is contractual, rather than sacramental), and to receive a dowry. Although women are only allowed to marry one man, and he must be Muslim, according to Islamic law, men may marry up to four wives, but they must be able to provide adequately for each. Although no case involving Muslim polygamy has been addressed in the United States, existing laws and court cases outlawing polygamy would presumably apply. Wives may also retain their private property and earnings after marriage, and the Qu’ran guarantees specific inheritance rights.

Islam recognizes remarkable women and “mothers of the faith”, including Khadija, Muhammad’s first wife, who exemplify the traditional feminine ideal of beauty, modesty, and devotion. ☞

ISLAM – Did you know?

- “Muhammadanism” is a term that one often sees used in outdated textbooks to refer to Islam. It is completely inaccurate as it suggests that Muslims worship Muhammad as a divine being. Islam stresses submission before God, not Muhammad.
- Many customs inaccurately associated with the submission of women in Islam actually originate in the cultural customs of various countries or regions, and have no basis in Islamic doctrine. For example, after marriage, Muslim women may retain any property or wealth they brought with them into the marriage, and may or may not wear the *Hijab*, or veil.
- There are approximately 4-5 million Muslims living in the United States, coming from various countries of origin. According to the New Historical Atlas of Religion in America, 28.4% are from the Middle East and Africa, 26.6% from Europe, 11.5 % from Asia, and 30.2% are from the United States and they are primarily African American.
- The term *jihad* is often misunderstood. It has two basic meanings: to struggle in defense of the faith; the spiritual struggle to become a better Muslim. It does not mean “holy war”.
- The crescent moon and star symbol often used in reference to Islam represents the position of the new moon at the start of the month of fasting — Ramadan.

PERSONAL FOCUS

Maha ElGenaidi is the Executive Director of the Islamic Network Group. In that role, she delivers presentations concerning Islam and the Muslim world to public institutions such as schools, law enforcement, the media and corporations.

"...When I first learned of the terrorist attacks [on 9-11], which I watched taking place at 6am that morning, my first and most immediate thought after the shock that this was actually happening, with the possible murder of thousands of people, was on my community, and what it would mean for us in the United States if a self-proclaimed Muslim was behind those attacks. So, I immediately ran into the office by 6:30/7:00, began contacting our board of directors and issuing a press release condemning the attacks. I believe our organization's release was one of the first sent by a Muslim organization, which was immediately picked up by CNN, which ran it the entire day..."

"...My family, associates at work, and Muslim community [were what I held onto in the first few days after 9-11, as well as] my deep reliance on God, knowing that this was not the end of the world; that this is a trial like no other trial we've ever experienced and that with patience and perseverance, God will get us through it..."

"...My faith community responded immediately after 9-11 in two principal ways:

1) Immediate condemnation of the attacks, which have nothing to do with Islam, but knowing that these attacks, whether committed by Muslims or not, would ultimately be associated with Muslims and Islam as are all terrorist attacks.

2) Legitimate fear, due to the consequences of associating a terrorist attack, such as this horrific act, with an entire community of people. I think particularly women in hijab (the veil) had the most to fear because they are easily identifiable. Many Muslim women in hijab either stayed home or disguised their hijab for a long period of time..."

"...A Catholic nun, Sr. Elizabeth Avalos, called to ask what the Church could do to help the community, particularly the women in hijab. She organized an interfaith Solidarity event which was phenomenal. Please look at this site for information about it... http://www.ing.org/10_4_women_of_faith.htm"

"...I think many Muslims now are involved more than ever in interfaith dialogue groups primarily due to the Christians who came to us extending their help and support, and offering a place at the table in dialogue groups. Also, I think many mosques have held open houses more than they ever have to promote understanding of their religion and community..."

"...We've been promoting education about Islam and the Muslim world since 1993 because we've always known that the path to understanding was education and dialogue. So, now instead of presenting to 700 locations;

since September 11th, we average about 1200 presentations a year. Also, as the executive director, I am personally involved in 3 dialogue group discussions (2 Christian based and one between Jews and Arabs) and sit on the boards of probably 7 other organizations. So, we're just doing more of what we've always done..." 🙏

COMMUNITY FOCUS

The Islamic Center of Southern California

"We are more than just a mosque. We are the center of education, social activity, cultural expression, and interfaith action for Muslims here in Southern California."

So explains Dr. Mahmoud Abdel-Baset, Religious and Social Services Coordinator for the Islamic Center of Southern California. "We focus on common issues of the Muslim community and Islam, issues of faith and culture that transcend individual experiences."

The Islamic Center has long been the defining institution for American Muslims as they seek to be a viable partner in the religious and cultural landscape of California. They have been the parent of many offspring organizations, among them the Muslim Public Affairs Council. But the Center is home to a variety of worship and programmatic opportunities, all of which are open to Muslim and non-Muslim alike.

The Center has an active and pioneering Sunday education series, which looks at cutting-edge, contemporary issues such as sexuality, extreme liberalism and extreme fundamentalism, and invites dialogue about the place of Muslim culture. "We must meet the needs of our community and help 'Open the Muslim Mind' (the title of a popular book at the Center). That is the purpose behind our educational programming," according to Dr. Abdel-Baset. The Center also offers counseling and guidance for immigrants who are challenged by the differences in American culture, and who seek practical advice for everyday situations.

Another strong Center program is the Muslim Youth Group. The Youth Group was formed to offer young people an opportunity to get to know each other in a wholesome, supervised atmosphere, one which leads to positive interactions and respect for each other. The youth group takes two camping retreats each year, as well as offers a variety of social and cultural programming year-round. Dr. Abdel-Baset explains, "It's important for us to provide a positive space for our youth to grow and appreciate each other and their faith. Unless we provide that for our youth, we will lose them."

The New Horizon School is another way that the Center is nurturing children and youth. Dr. Abdel-Baset notes that through the New Horizon School, "we are building the future of Islam in America, by ensuring that our young are comfortable with their Muslim identity as they exist within the pluralism of American culture." Social

(continues on page 32)

and charitable outreach is a growing concern for the Center. Muslim tradition requires charitable giving, but what is most important is one's moral and personal responsibility to God. "Institutional and charitable giving is as important as prayer," says Dr. Abdel-Baset. The interfaith work of the Center, including participating in the Wilshire Center Parish Association, is extremely

meaningful. The Center staff provides speakers to high schools on Islam as a means of building bridges across faith traditions. The universal message of humanity is at the heart of the Koran and the Muslim faith tradition. "It's important that as we establish Islam in America, the Islamic Center provide a working model of social, cultural, education and interfaith expression." 🕌

STUDY QUESTIONS

After reading the section on Islam, read and reflect on the following questions. Record your answers.

1. What aspect(s) of Islamic life might be difficult to observe while living in the United States? In what ways might U.S. culture and traditions support an Islamic way of life?
2. The video segment on Islam mentions teaching "about" religion in California schools. What is your view on including study about religion as part of a basic education?
3. What similarities do you see between Islam and your own faith? What differences do you see between Islam and your own faith?
4. What did you learn about Islam that surprised you?
5. Are there aspects of Islamic life or practice that you admire? If so, what are they?
6. What questions remain?



Photographs by Jerry Berndt, courtesy of the USC Center for Religion and Civic Culture.

SESSION 6 - SIKHISM

SESSION PLAN

Participants should come to the session having read the background piece (pages 34-37) on Sikhism. By the end of this session participants will:

- ✓ Understand something about the history, traditions, beliefs and practices of Sikhism.
- ✓ Reflect on the experiences of Sikhs in the United States and California.
- ✓ Begin to consider ways to promote understanding by building bridges with Sikh congregations in their own communities.

Gathering and Introduction 5 minutes

Arrange seating in a circle. Open with prayer, meditation or a moment of silence. Ask each person to introduce him or herself.

Reports from last class 5 minutes

Ask those who researched the Muslim stereotypes to report back to the group about their findings.

Review of Reading and Questions 5 minutes

Use the Sikhism Review Outline to guide a discussion on the reading about Sikhism and the study questions.

Video Segment 10 minutes

The video companion piece on Sikhism is about 10 minutes long. Play this through for the group, asking them to pay special attention to the model of community involvement and the viewpoints of youth, and statements or practices of significance.

Discussion of the Video 10 minutes

Arrange the groups in dyads (twos). Ask them to list the challenges to Sikhs living in California and the U.S. that they saw in the video, and also any coping mechanisms. Share some of these with the entire group.

Equality in Sikhism 10 minutes

Both Sikhism and Christianity recognize a direct and personal connection between the individual and God. However, in Sikhism this is interpreted also to mean that men and women have equal status both socially and spiritually. Arrange participants into dyads and ask them to list the ways American culture supports the full equality of women, and the ways it directly or indirectly subordinates women. Share some with the whole group if time permits.

Assignments 5 minutes

Spend 5 minutes taking the pretest once again, and checking answers to see how much learning has occurred. Ask each participant to come up with two ideas about how their congregation could build bridges with Sikhs in their community. If they are not aware of Sikhs in their local area, ask if someone might be willing to research whether there are any Sikh groups in the area. If there seem to be none, ask the group to consider how they might promote respect and understanding of Sikhism in their congregation.

Closing 5 minutes

Ask participants to complete the sentence “A new insight I received today is...” Close with a simple prayer.

REVIEW OUTLINE

- Sikhism is one of the world's youngest religions, and is the result of the travels and attempts to effect peace of its founder, Guru Nanak.
- There were nine living Gurus in Sikhism before their scripture, the Guru Granth Sahib, was installed in 1708 as the final authority along with the community.
- Sikhs ascribe to a belief in karma, reincarnation and union with the divine. However, it is a non-ritualistic faith, placing full participation in the responsibilities of life and community as the primary aspiration.
- Sikhism believes in the equality of all persons, regardless of gender, and Sikhs take special surnames to reflect this equality.
- Sikhs who become *Khalsa* make vows of obedience, including wearing the five symbols of Sikhism, called the Five K's.
- American Sikhs are a branch of Sikhism founded in the U.S. in the 1960's. Men and women in this group, who call themselves 3HO, wear turbans and all-white clothing.



Photographs by Jerry Berndt, courtesy of the USC Center for Religion and Civic Culture.

INTRODUCTION TO SIKHISM

Sikhism, one of the world's youngest religions, was founded only 500 years ago. It is a monotheistic religion that originated in the Indian province of Punjab (now part of the undivided Punjab which includes part of present-day Pakistan and portions of Afghanistan). The founder of Sikhism, Guru Nanak, was born in 1469. For many years he traveled as a seeker of truth, visiting many Hindu religious sites, as well as Mecca and Medina.

Coming from a region that had been historically Hindu, but was subjected to Islamic rule at the time of his birth, Nanak sought peace by combining the values of Hinduism and Islam. At the age of 38, Guru Nanak had a revelatory experience and began to teach his direct revelation in the form of hymns. These hymns are still cherished and sung in the Sikh community. They teach that religion consists in being mindful of God, meditating on God's name, and reflecting God in one's life. Guru Nanak traveled throughout the Arab world, attracting both Hindu and Muslim followers. They became known as Sikhs, from the Sanskrit word *shishya* meaning "disciple".

Nanak and each of the nine Gurus who followed him selected their own successor while alive. Gobind Singh, who died in 1708, was the last living Guru. He pronounced the end of the lineage of Gurus in a physical body, and vested final authority in the Sikh community and in the Scriptures, which are called *Guru Granth Sahib*.

BELIEFS

The Mool Mantra, which begins the *Guru Granth Sahib*, outlines the beliefs of Sikhs:

There is One God.
He
Is Supreme Truth
Is without fear
Is Timeless, Eternal
Is not born, so
He does not die to be reborn.
Self-illuminated,
By Guru's grace
He is revealed to the human soul.
Truth was in the beginning,
and throughout the ages.
Truth is now and ever will be.

Guru Nanak accepted some traditional beliefs of Hinduism, such as the cyclical nature of time (the earth endures endless cycles of creation and destruction), and reincarnation. "Haumai," or self-centeredness, caused by greed, lust, pride, anger and attachment to the passing things of earthly life, is believed by Sikhs to be the source of all evil. It is this self-centeredness that produces *karma* and the endless cycles of rebirth.

Sikhs believe that the purpose of human life is to experience spiritual union with the Divine – "to merge with Ultimate Reality like a drop of water merges with the ocean and becomes one with it", rather than to attain salvation or a heavenly abode like Paradise. This union with God is enlightenment – release from reincarnation, and any person can attain it.

Sikhism believes in full participation in human life, work and family. Responsibility in these areas is a way to serve and seek God. Sikhs understand God to be both immanent and transcendent, encouraging each individual to aspire to become God-like while living.

Sikhism believes in the equality of all persons regardless of gender. Guru Gobind Singh, the tenth guru, declared that all followers should change their last names: Singh (or lion) for men, and Kaur (or princess) for women, indicating universal equality.

SACRED BOOKS/SCRIPTURES

The Guru Granth Sahib is the central scripture of Sikhs and is enthroned as the current living guru for the community. It is at the heart of Sikh worship and lends sacredness to the *gurdwara* or temple. Sikhs bow before the Guru Granth Sahib and pray in its presence. It has undergone developmental changes since the time of Guru Nanak, but received its distinctive form under the fifth Guru, Arjan. In addition to the teaching of several gurus, it also contains Hindu and Muslim hymns, and is written in rhyming couplets. It was composed in Sanskrit, Persian, Hindi and Punjabi. It is printed in "Gurmukhi" script, which is an alphabet adapted for the Punjabi language. The Guru Granth Sahib now consists of 1,430 standardized pages. Also an important text, and published in 1945, the "Rehat Maryada" (or Sikh Code of Conduct) regulates individual and corporate Sikh life.

PRACTICES, RITUALS and CELEBRATIONS

Sikh practices include dress, life cycle rituals, festivals, the *langar* meal, and worship in the temple.

At puberty, some Sikhs go through an initiation, called the *Amrit*, which originated with the last living guru in 1699. The initiate makes a promise to follow the Sikh code of conduct and then becomes *Khalsa*, belonging to God, or "pure". He or she vows to:

- Abstain from the use of alcohol, other intoxicants or tobacco
- Never to cut the hair on any part of the body
- Not to eat the meat of sacrificial or ritual animals
- To refrain from any sexual contact outside marriage
- To wear the five symbols (often called the five K's) of Sikhs.

All Sikhs, whether Khalsa or not, are enjoined to pray daily, to tithe time and income to the community, and to live a moral life of service and humility. The five symbols, or five K's are:

1. Kesh: not to cut the hair (men wear a turban over theirs) – surrender to the will of God.
2. Kanga: a comb is to be carried within the hair – to clean the hair.
3. Karra: an iron bracelet is worn – to experience oneself as a slave to the will of the prophets.
4. Kirpan: a kirpan or steel dagger is worn – symbol to fight against evil in oneself and in society through lawful means.
5. Kacherra: a specific knee-length undergarment is worn – symbol of chastity.

Sikhism has neither monks nor nuns, and both lay people and the “clergymen” or *granthi* are encouraged to marry. Most *granthi*, those who recite the Guru Granth Sahib, are male, but women who are Khalsa also may publicly recite from the scriptures. The term has no gender associated with it. There is no ecclesiastical hierarchy – all Sikh congregations are autonomous.

Sikh gatherings consist of singing passages of the Guru Granth Sahib, some teaching based on a passage delivered by the *granthi*, prayer and the congregational meal or *langar*. All the festivals celebrated by Sikhs include men and women, hymn singing, lectures, consecrated food, and food for the congregation. Sikhism is basically anti-ritualistic, so only simple rites and ceremonies are observed. Life cycle rituals observed by Sikhs include naming, baptism, marriage and funeral rites. Sikhs celebrate many festivals, but five are observed universally:

Birthday of Guru Nanak. Observed in October/November.

Birthday of Guru Gobind.

Celebrated on December 22.

Installation of the Guru Granth Sahib as Guru.

Celebrated in September/October, this festival commemorates the date in 1604 when the sacred book was installed as guru for the community at the Golden Temple in Amritsar.

Vaisakhi (the New Year). Celebration is on April 13, the date the Khalsa order was founded by Guru Gobind in 1699. Also celebrated is the first annual gathering of Sikhs at the center of pilgrimage, Goindwal, which took place during Guru Amar Das' Guruship (1552-1574).

Diwali. Similar to the Hindu festival of light, this celebration also commemorates the return of the sixth Guru, Har Gobind (1606-1644) to the holy city of Amritsar after his release from prison. Celebrated in October/November.

AMERICAN SIKHS

While there are no denominations in Sikhism, in the United States there is a grouping of Sikhs along cultural and language lines. This group, originating in the 1960s, is called American Sikhs and is distinguishable from other Sikhs by their mode of dress, which is all white, and they follow a strict vegetarian diet and set times of worship. Women as well as men also wear turbans. Their leader is Yogi Harbhajan Singh and they call themselves 3HO (Healthy, Happy, Holy Organization). They know only a limited amount of Punjabi. Sikhs of Indian origin and American Sikhs also share some basic beliefs and practices, visit one another's gurdwaras and are mutually accepting.

THE ROLES OF WOMEN

The Gurus of Sikhism were among the first men in the modern world to encourage freedom and full status and participation for women. In keeping with the Sikh commitment to equality, men and women are expected to preserve their spiritual and social independence and identity from one another. There is no mediator between each individual and God – that relationship is personal and direct. ☞

SIKHISM – Did you know?

- The symbol most often associated with Sikhism is called the Khanda. It is composed of five parts, which have been interpreted to symbolize the unity of God, God's concern for justice and truth, and God's spiritual power.
- Sikh young people who have been initiated, and are therefore observant of the five K's, have been allowed by the Ninth Circuit Court of Appeals to carry their *kirpan*, the steel dagger, to school under certain conditions. Although all public schools must adhere to a “no weapons” policy, Sikh youth may wear the kirpan so long as it is sewn or bolted into the sheath so that it cannot be removed. In some of these cases it is also worn beneath the clothing.
- Sikhs were among the Asian groups denied the right to immigrate to the U.S in 1926. However, Sikh immigration returned in 1965, when immigration law was relaxed.
- The estimated number of Sikhs in the U.S. is about 400,000.
- One of the largest populations of Sikhs in the world is in Fremont, California.

PERSONAL FOCUS

*Mr. Darshan Singh Mundy
West Sacramento Sikh community*

"...Immediately after the attacks on September 11, I took it this way – that the attack was personally on me. My immediate thought was that no religion allows this kind of heinous crime. I condemned it as not right. .."

"...My faith community got together on the weekend. Everyone took the attack very seriously. Some even mentioned that they were ready to sacrifice their lives for this nation – they were very eager to help their community. We collected funds for the New York victims, and used our own media network to talk among ourselves all across the nation. Sikhs are a loving people – we believe in helping everybody..."

"...I grew up in India and my experience from childhood was growing up with Hindus, Christians, Muslims – everyone. We are a family of one God. The Holy book written by our prophets has references from all the religions – we respect all religions..."

"...About the third day after 9-11 we began to become aware of the misunderstandings about Sikhism. One Sikh – in Arizona – was the first casualty when he was mistaken for a Muslim. Some Sikhs started to cut their hair and not wear their turbans out of fear of violence. Locally, in west Sacramento, there was an incident. Our attorney general held a news conference and announced "zero tolerance" for hate crimes. All the faiths came out to help – we were all together. Later the President visited Sacramento. Some Sikhs met with him and he said for us to stay with our faith – that it was his responsibility to protect our faith. I was impressed because we didn't get official recognition as a faith in India, but we got it here. I thought later that maybe the Sikh who died in Arizona died so that our religion could be recognized..." 🏠



COMMUNITY FOCUS

Sikh Temple Community Kitchen of Fremont

"Come and eat! It's buffet style!" With these words, visitors to the Sikh Temple in Fremont are greeted, 24 hours a day, seven days a week. The only requirements to join in the community vegetarian meal are that your head is covered, your shoes are removed, and you are hungry.

The langar, or community kitchen, is operated year-round by the Sikh Temple members. It serves between 3,000 and 5,000 people on Sunday afternoons, the most typical time for community members and friends to gather for a meal together. Families take turns providing and preparing the meals. Food is always available, even in the middle of the night.

Lisa Fernandez of the San Jose Mercury News profiled the Fremont temple last April. She wrote:

"... The purpose of the langar is to make it possible for anyone – non-Sikhs, too – to have a place to eat 24 hours a day, seven days a week.... According to tradition, it was in the langar where rich and poor, man and woman, would cook, clean and eat together, a foundation of Sikh equality. The langar was a practical place to teach community service, remove untouchability and other social prejudices.

...a homeless person will sometimes drop by for a meal. But most non-Sikhs don't know about the community kitchen, and temple leaders hope to make better connections with Bay Area homeless shelters and food kitchens to share the wealth..... Young Sikh volunteers at the new San Jose temple are planning to deliver leftovers to shelters.

The langar has no tables; meals are eaten on the floor in a large hall adjacent to the main temple where the holy book is kept. While all Sikh Temples have the langar, the Fremont Temple is unique in that it never closes."

Visitors are always welcome. The Fremont Sikh Temple is located in a residential community at 300 Gurdwara Road, Fremont, CA. 🏠

Photographs by Jerry Berndt, courtesy of the USC Center for Religion and Civic Culture.

STUDY QUESTIONS

After reading the section on Sikhism, read and reflect on the following questions. Record your answers.

1. How would you describe the meaning and significance of the 5 K's?

2. The Guru Granth Sahib (scripture) is the living guru, or teacher, for the Sikh community. How does this support the belief that each individual has direct access to God?

3. What did you learn about Sikh practices that surprised you?

4. What are some Sikh practices that might be difficult to observe living in the U.S. Why?

5. What similarities do you see between Sikhism and your own faith? What differences do you see between Sikhism and your own faith?

6. What questions remain?



Photographs by Jerry Berndt, courtesy of the USC Center for Religion and Civic Culture.

KEY

PRETEST – WORLD RELIGIONS IN AMERICA: BUILDING BRIDGES OF UNDERSTANDING

Please answer true or false to the following questions:

- | | |
|--------------|---|
| True | 1. When they are initiated into Sikhism, men change their surname to a word meaning “lion.” |
| False | 2. Hinduism is an ancient religion coming from a single source and founder.
Answer: Hinduism has no single founder or source. |
| False | 3. Muslims must pray only three times each day
Answer: Muslims must pray five times each day. |
| True | 4. Reform Judaism ordained its first woman rabbi in 1972. |
| True | 5. A Bodhisattva in Buddhism is an enlightened one who chooses to work for the salvation of all beings. |
| True | 6. The Romans crucified Jesus, a first century Jewish man whom Christians worship as the Son of God. |
| False | 7. Jewish holidays begin at sunrise.
Answer: Jewish holidays begin at sunset. |
| True | 8. Muslim civilization led the western world during the Golden Age of Islam, which is roughly the same time period as the dark and Middle Ages in Europe. |
| True | 9. Hinduism recognizes four natural stages of life, each with its own appropriate goals and behavior. |
| False | 10. Sikhs do not believe in the equality of men and women.
Answer: Sikhs do believe in the equality of all people. |
| True | 11. Even by its adherents, Buddhism is often spoken of as a philosophy rather than as a religion. |
| True | 12. Roman Catholic and Orthodox Christians accept the 12 books of the Apocrypha as an official part of the Bible. |

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MULTIMEDIA

- On Common Ground: World Religions In America*. CD-ROM. New York: Columbia University Press, 1997. Call 1-800-944-8648, or visit www.columbia.edu/cu/cup
- What Do You Believe?* Director/Producer Sarah Feinbloom. VHS Video, New Day Films. A documentary video about American teens, spirituality and freedom of religion. Includes 28-page activities guide. Call 1-888-367-9154.

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RESOURCES / BIBLIOGRAPHY (continued)

INTERNET RESOURCES

The United Religions Initiative. www.uri.org

Information about the world's religions written by scholar/adherents of the faiths.

The Council on Islamic Education. www.cie.org

Teaching guides and curricula for teaching about Islam in the schools under appropriate First Amendment guidelines.

Education About Southeast Asia Vidya. Contact Rashmi Singh at EduSAVidya@aol.com

Curricula for teaching about the religions of Southeast Asia, including Hinduism, Sikhism and Islam.

National Conference for Community and Justice. www.nccj.org

The NCCJ has a wonderful interfaith calendar on their web site that is excellent for anyone needing to consider many faith traditions' holidays while scheduling meetings and events.

University of Southern California Center for Religion and Civic Culture: www.usc.edu/crcc/manyfaiths

Resources and contact information on local and regional interfaith organizations throughout California.

Notes

This image shows a blank sheet of white paper with horizontal ruling lines. The lines are evenly spaced and extend across the width of the page. There are no margins, text, or other markings on the paper.