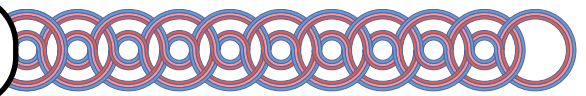


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Introduction

Religions Originating in South Asia

Make a transparency or reproducible copies of the map on this page and the map on page 11. Share with students the following information:

The Hindu, Buddhist and Sikh religions originated in the South Asian subcontinent comprising India and Pakistan, beginning with Hinduism as early as 2000 BCE. These three religions differ from the Semitic faiths in some of their most basic beliefs. Hinduism, for example, is a polytheistic religion, meaning that Hindus may believe in various forms of God. (*Poly* means many, while *theism* means belief in God or gods.) Buddhists, on the other hand, do not necessarily believe in God at all. The Sikh religion, the youngest of these faiths, is *monotheistic* (believing in one God) like the Semitic faiths.



The Indus valley, nurtured by the Indus River, is the birthplace of Hinduism. The Buddha delivered his first sermon at the city of Sarnath near the sacred Hindu city of Benares. To the North is Amritsar, the spiritual centre of the Sikh religion. As you can see, this area of the world was the starting point for many religions. Hindus number over 800 million worldwide and make up a large majority of the one billion population of the present day India. There are about 20 million Sikhs with about 80 per cent living in India. Buddhism expanded into the rest of Asia to become the dominant faith in China, Japan and many countries of Southeast Asia. In India, Buddhists are now a small minority.

About Date References

The abbreviations BCE, BC, AD and CE are common terms used to reference time. (In this series, BCE and CE are used.) Some students may not be familiar with one or more of these terms. Use page 47 to introduce or review the abbreviations with students.

Suggestions for the Teacher

The books in this series present content that introduces students to several world beliefs. Various terms, phrases and general content may, at times, be difficult for students to comprehend. It is suggested that segments containing intense factual content be read and discussed together. Have students keep a journal in which they outline important information and maintain a glossary of new terms and their meanings.

The Life and Teachings of Guru Nanak

Of the religions that had their beginnings in the South Asian subcontinent, the Sikh religion is the youngest, beginning around the year 1500 CE. The majority of its 20 million followers still live in the Indian portion of Punjab, a region in the north of India and Pakistan. Sikh communities now exist on every continent. There are about ten thousand Sikhs in Australia. Sikhs were among the first Indians to arrive in Australia, between 1860 and 1900.

Most people know very little, if anything, about the Sikh religion. The faith is rich in history, tradition and hardship. It is *monotheistic* (belief in one God) like the Semitic faiths and considers people to be created equal. Accordingly, it rejects distinctions based on colour, *caste* (class or station in society), ethnicity, gender, creed or any other consideration. Sikhs emphasise prayer, honest living, hard work and sharing the fruits of their labour with others.

Like many other religions, the Sikh religion began with the teachings of one person. He was Guru Nanak. The word 'guru' has special meaning in the Sikh religion. Guru Nanak is regarded as a perfect being in complete union with God, sent by God to spread His Message and uplift mankind. The Sikh scripture assigns many divine attributes to the Guru. Unlike many other religions, another guru, Guru Angad, followed Guru Nanak. In all, there were ten gurus, each one responsible for carrying on the teachings and leadership of the Sikh people. All ten will be introduced in this book.

Guru Nanak is considered the spiritual founder of the Sikh religion. Understanding his life and spirit will help you better understand the beliefs and customs of the Sikh faith.

Most of what we know about Guru Nanak's life comes from a series of stories called *Janamsakhis*. The oldest of these, written towards the end of the sixteenth century, appears to be the oldest composition in prose written in the Punjabi language.

Guru Nanak

The Life and Teachings of Guru Nanak (cont.)

Guru Nanak's life is similar to the lives of other messengers of God. Guru Nanak was born on 15 April 1469, in a village now a part of Pakistan in an upper caste Hindu family. At the birth of Guru Nanak, a priest is said to have envisioned the newborn as a divine messenger, speaking especially of Guru Nanak's love for all people, regardless of caste or religion.

During Guru Nanak's time, Muslim kings ruled much of South Asia, though the majority of the population was Hindu. Growing up in a world of political and social problems between members of different faiths, Guru Nanak inspired togetherness and tolerance. In fact, as a child, his teachers included both Hindus and Muslims.

There is a story about Guru Nanak when he was eleven years old. Having been born in a Hindu family, he was asked to go through the Hindu Sacred Thread ceremony. He refused to do so. This distaste of rituals and the markings of caste was fundamental to Guru Nanak's teachings. When the Hindu priest asked the child Nanak to wear the Sacred Thread, he is said to have replied with the following advice (page 472 of *Guru Granth Sahib* – the Sikh scripture):

'Make compassion the cotton, contentment the wool;

Give it chastity's knot and twist of charity;

Such is the true thread of the self.

Put such on me, you Brahmin, if you have it.

*It will not break, it will not be soiled, it will not burn nor
deteriorate;*

O Nanak, blessed are those persons who live wearing it.'

The Life and Teachings of Guru Nanak (cont.)

To Guru Nanak, a person's behaviour and internal life mattered more than any ceremony or ritual. Several stories tell of Guru Nanak showing people the hopelessness of empty rituals. Once he went to Hardwar, a place of pilgrimage for Hindus. He saw some people standing in the Ganges River throwing water towards the east at the rising sun. Guru Nanak got in the water, too and started throwing water towards the west. The people asked him why he was throwing water towards the west. He asked them why they were throwing water towards the east. They said, 'We're sending sacred water to our ancestors 490 million miles away in heaven.' Then Guru Nanak asked them, 'Does the water you throw reach them?' They replied, 'Yes, of course it does.' Guru Nanak then said, 'I have a small farm near Lahore; I am sending water to my fields there.' They laughed and said, 'How can you send water from here to your farm in Lahore, hundreds of miles away?' Guru Nanak replied, 'If the water you throw at the sun will reach heaven, surely my fields are much closer and the water I throw should reach my fields.' They understood what he meant by this and learned that rituals like throwing water at the sun are as futile as watering your fields by throwing water at them from hundreds of miles away.

Like many before him, Guru Nanak came to the world on a divine mission. According to Sikh belief, divine guides like him are not in the cycle of birth and death like the rest of humanity. They take birth for the benefit of mankind and are sent by God for uplifting people. They give the world the gift of worship and unite people with God. Guru Nanak and his successors preached worship of the One and Only God and taught that remembering God was the purpose of life; that life as a human being was an opportunity to understand God and see Him in all beings; that love of God and of God's creation was the way to rise above the fear of death to peace and joy. Guru Nanak proclaimed that there was neither Hindu nor Muslim but all were God's children.