

Who is God? What is Faith?

'You can be strong in your faith, but understand there are people of other faiths. Help others be strong in their faith.'

Sri Ramakrishna, Hindu sage

Who is God?

The idea of God is the most important and yet the most questioned of religious beliefs. Judaism, Islam, Hinduism and Christianity all claim to reveal something of who God is through their holy books or scriptures, through their prophets and teachers and through the traditions and experience of their faith. For followers of these religions, God is real and active, a powerful force for good that enables women and men, girls and boys to reach their full potential as human beings. Yet the idea of God remains elusive and frequently challenged.

Past experience influences our present perceptions. If our childhood ideas of God were happy, we may have positive feelings towards God as adults. But if we have had no opportunity to grow in our understanding of God, we may dismiss belief in God as childish and irrelevant to our adult life. For some people, the word 'God' is laden with autocratic authority. God is experienced as exclusively masculine with no feminine attributes. For some, God is judgmental and punishing, whilst for others God is loving and forgiving. Some people cannot believe in something that cannot be explained whilst others are happy to believe in the mystery of the divine.

The concept of a deity is older than recorded history. It is the strongest component of oral tradition in many cultures. Within the word 'God' are many ideas that are basic to human thought.

Language about God

Since God is a supreme being, millions would say "the supreme being", anything we can say about Him or Her is only a faint approximation. Language is part of the limitations of being human. We can only describe the divine in metaphors that point to who God is. God is greater than anything we can imagine or say, beyond time and space and certainly beyond gender.

Each of us is different. If we follow a particular faith, we are taught different things about God. The world's religions use many words to describe deity. Here are a few: Creator, Holy Wisdom, All-Seeing, Protector, Source of Love and Compassion, One, Rock of Salvation, Radiant Light and Beauty, Forgiver, Father, Mother, Ruler, Purifier, Lord, Exalted One, All-Merciful, I Am, Ground of Our Being, The Almighty, Alpha and Omega and The Great Spirit.

The phrase 'Alpha and Omega' is particularly comprehensive. In using the first and last letters of the Greek alphabet, it describes God as the 'beginning and the end.' In other words, God is the ultimate source of all that was and is and will be. At the same time, God is the ultimate end of all things. This is a very powerful symbol that somehow encompasses all the other ideas about God.

Who, then, is God? Only you can decide who God is in your life. If you belong to one of the major world religions, you will probably cherish a definition of God from within its traditions. For example, Islam, Judaism and Christianity all teach that there is only one God who is the creator of everything, eternal, all-powerful and all-knowing. For followers of these religions, God is holy and perfect, just

Who is God? What is Faith

and merciful. And because of who God is, each follower is taught how to behave within the ethical framework of their religion. But such teaching is overlain with an individual understanding of God that is bound up with an individual's life experience. Your relationship with God is deeply personal, even though it is shared with other believers. God will be your God.

Hindus do not have a word for God like Jews, Christians and Muslims. For Hindus, God is symbolised by the monosyllable AUM. The doctrine of God for Hindus is found in their sacred texts. God is all powerful, omnipresent and omniscient. In Hinduism, there are Gods and Goddesses, for example Shakti the Goddess of Power, Mahalakshmi the Goddess of Wealth and Saraswati the Goddess of Education. Hindus believe that God has had 'Avatars' in human form for example Lord Krishna and Lord Rama. God appears in human form in order to redeem the world.

Of the five major world religions, Buddhism does not have a doctrine of God.

What is Faith?

At the dawn of the New Millennium, a remarkable search is taking place around the world. Many people want to have faith in something or someone who typifies meaning in life and who brings them hope and peace. Materialism leaves them feeling empty and barren. They are yearning for a spiritual sense of belonging, for faith in something beyond themselves.

We are all familiar with faith. We have been faith-filled since infancy when we trusted our parents to feed and to care for us. Faith in God is something like this. It is much more than a mechanical reaction to everyday events or scientific phenomena. It is the absolute conviction that our intimate relationship with God is part of a cosmic purpose and pattern.

Faith in God, no matter how God is defined, has given people of all cultures strength to endure incredible hardships and hope against seemingly impossible odds. The stories of people of faith are inspirational. Many have changed the course of history and enriched the lives of millions. They are ordinary people doing extraordinary deeds.

Duty to God / Duty to Spiritual Beliefs

If you do not have faith in God, you may define yourself as an agnostic, someone who does not know whether or not there is a God. Or you may have decided that you are an atheist, someone who definitely does not believe in God or a humanist, someone who believes in the advancement of humanity through its own efforts. But all those who belong to WAGGGS make a promise of Duty to God however God is defined for them:

'The essence of Duty to God is the acknowledgement of the necessity for a search for a faith in God, in a Supreme Being, and the acknowledgement of a Force higher than man, of the highest Spiritual Principles.'

(21st World Conference, Canada 1972)

In Sri Lanka, where many of the Girl Guides / Girl Scouts are Buddhists, Duty to God is replaced by duty to religion:

'I promise on my honour to do my best, to do my duty, to my religion and country, to help others at all times and obey the Guide Law.'

It is the duty of each Girl Guide/Girl Scout to acknowledge her search for spiritual meaning. This search is a life journey that requires an open-minded commitment to spiritual progress.

Overview of world religions

The major world religions are Hinduism, Judaism, Buddhism, Christianity and Islam. Although each arose in a specific part of the world, today their believers can be found in almost every country. Date references are based on the Common Era calendar. BC means 'Before Christ' and AD 'Anno Domini' which is translated 'the year of our Lord.'

Hinduism

Hinduism, the religion of most people in India, is considered the oldest of the world's major religions. It goes back to perhaps 2000 BC, when Aryans invaded the Indian sub-continent. The Aryan religious traditions, which included the worship of the gods Vishnu, Shiva and others, absorbed local tribal rites.

The Hindu sacred texts, Rig Veda, Veds, Upanishads, Puranas, Ramoyana, Bhagvad Gita, are the oldest religious literature in the world in use today. The Vedas comprise collections of poems, hymns, liturgical texts and reflections on sacrificial ritual and bind together the complex Hindu belief systems.

The essence of Hindu faith is symbolised by the monosyllable AUM, the symbol of divinity. Hindus believe in reincarnation – that after this life we shall be born again in another body. How you live in this life determines how you will be reborn (karma). Those who achieve the highest state (nirvana) escape the endless round of birth, death and rebirth.

Hindu worship centres on shrines in the home with pictures of the deity (male or female) most special to the household. Congregational worship in a temple includes offerings of goods, praise, music and readings.

Most Hindus are strict vegetarians because they believe in the sacredness of all living beings. Hindus believe in 'Ahmisa', non-violence and 'Apigraha', selflessness.

There are many sects of Hinduism in India. Probably the most influential leader in recent centuries was Mahatma Ghandi, who believed in peaceful, purposeful action to achieve a better life for all. In 1948 Gandhi's assassination brought shock and sorrow to the whole world.

Judaism

Judaism is the religion of the Jewish people. The original name for the people we now call Jews was Hebrews. Another name is the children of Israel or Israelites. The history of Judaism begins with Abraham.

In 1800 BC, Abraham left Ur (in present-day Iraq) for the Promised Land where he made a covenant with God. Famine sent Abraham's descendants to Egypt where the descendants lived in slavery until around 1200 BC, when Moses led the Israelites back to Israel. Two events from that time remain at the centre of the Jewish faith. The first was the final plague on the people of Egypt who had refused to free the Israelites. The plague ensured that the first born of every Egyptian family was killed. But the Israelite children were saved because the doorposts of their homes were marked with the blood of a lamb. The other event was the giving of the Ten Commandments to Moses. Jews still obey those commandments.

Jews believe in one God, creator of the universe, who is both transcendent and immanent, awe-inspiring but as loving as a parent. They believe that they have to obey God's commandments. The Jewish people are waiting for the arrival of the Messiah who will inaugurate a time of justice and peace for the world. At that time God will raise the dead, reward the good and punish the bad.

Overview of world religions

The Tanach reflect the long history of the special relationship between God and the Jewish people. The first five books are very important. They are known as the Torah and they contain the Ten Commandments. Another important text is the Talmud, writings written by religious leaders known as rabbis, that includes discussion and interpretation of the Torah, the rules for everyday life.

Despite exile from their own land and dispersion to many countries over the centuries where they often suffered terrible persecution, Judaism remains vibrant. Its followers have a keen sense of identity as a community of believers. They go to the synagogue to pray, they observe a complex system of dietary laws and they maintain family religious observances.

There are three streams within Judaism: Orthodox, Conservative and Reform. The main issue that divides the movements is the interpretation of the Talmud.

Buddhism

Buddhism originated in 600 BC/700 BC with the teaching of Siddhartha Gautama, known as the Buddha, the Enlightened One. Siddhartha was born to a royal Ksatriya family living near the India–Nepal border. At his birth there was a prophecy that either he would become a world conqueror or conquer the world by renouncing it and becoming a Buddha. He did the latter. When he was aged about 30 he encountered a sick man, a dead man and a wandering ascetic. Siddhartha renounced the world (including his wife and child) to seek enlightenment like the ascetic. Siddhartha sat under a tree for many years determined to achieve enlightenment. He ate only what dropped from the tree. The tree became known as the Bodhi (Enlightenment) tree for under it Siddhartha, resisting the attacks and temptations of Mara, the king of the demons, became the Buddha. The Buddha then delivered his first sermon comprising the Four Noble Truths that form the basic teachings of

Buddhism:

The Truth of Suffering. Life is characterised by suffering including birth, disease, old age and death.

The Truth of the Cause. Suffering is caused by desire.

The Truth of Cessation. Suffering can be ended if its causes, desires and ignorance are removed.

The Truth of the Way. The way to attain Nirvâna (extinction) is to follow the Eightfold Way in many lifetimes through reincarnation: Right Knowledge, Right Resolve, Right Speech, Right Action, Right Livelihood, Right Moral Effort, Right Thoughts, and Right Meditation.

The Buddha established a monastic order with five basic rules: not to kill, not to steal, not to be unchaste, not to drink alcohol, not to lie. Buddhism went on to develop a code of behaviour based on ten 'perfections': duty, giving, renunciation, insight, patience, truth, resolution, courage, kindness and serenity.

As Buddhism declined in India, it flourished in countries to the east and south (Sri Lanka, Burma, Thailand, Cambodia, Laos, Korea, Japan, Vietnam, China, Tibet) with three main traditions: Hinayana, Mahayana and Vajrayana. Buddhist scriptures are called the Tripitaka or Three Baskets that consist of the Sūtrapitaka, the Buddha's sermons, the Vinayapitaka, the monastic rules and the Abhidharma-pitaka, early philosophical treatises.

Buddhism is a peaceable religion, tolerant of other faiths. There are many monastic communities, both male and female. Buddhists do not believe in a God.

Christianity

Christianity has its roots in Judaism. The teachings and practice of Christianity are based on the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. For Christians Jesus is the Son of

Overview of world religions

God who chose to live as a human and was born into the world as a Jew. The four Gospels of the New Testament found within the Bible tell of Jesus' ministry that took place in Israel roughly between 29 and 32 AD. In a short time, Jesus made an amazing impact on the people who became his followers and on the large crowds who heard him teach, witnessed his miracles, saw him crucified on a cross in Jerusalem and then encountered him after his resurrection from the dead. Christians believe that Jesus is the long-awaited Jewish Messiah. Although Jesus was crucified for political reasons, Christians believe his death cancels the sins of the world, reconciling God with humankind.

The most important part of Christian worship is called the Eucharist, a Greek word meaning 'to give thanks'. It is also known as the Mass, the Lord's Supper and Holy Communion. It re-enacts the Last Supper that Jesus shared with his disciples when he broke bread, blessed it and shared it with them and when he blessed and shared wine. Bread represents the body of Jesus broken on the cross and wine his blood shed on the cross.

The story of Jesus' life and teachings became known as the gospel (evangelio), a Greek word that means 'good news'. The good news spread throughout the world and Christianity is now established everywhere. It has many denominations that emphasise different Christian doctrines or beliefs: Roman Catholic, Eastern Orthodox, Anglican, and numerous Protestant churches such as Lutheran, Reformed, Baptist and Methodist. But all the denominations share a belief in one God, expressed through the Trinity: God the creator of the universe, Jesus, the Son of God who saved humanity through his sacrificial death and the Holy Spirit who gives guidance to all people.

Christianity is a community faith. Christians try to follow Jesus' law of love by caring for the poor, striving against injustice and working for peace and justice. They share the history

of the Jewish people as written in the Old Testament. The New Testament tells the story of Jesus, the spread of Christianity and the founding of the early Christian communities and churches.

Islam

The root of the word Islam is Silm and Salam which means peace. Salam also means greeting each other with peace, submission to the One God and living in peace with the creator. Islam is a total system of living.

Muslims believe that the prophet Muhammad was chosen by God to deliver God's message of peace. The message itself is called Islam and is revealed in the Qur'an. It informs people about the true mission of Jesus, Moses, Jacob, Isaac and Abraham.

The legal sources of Islam are the Qur'an and the Hadith. The Hadith is the report of the deeds, sayings and approvals of the prophet Muhammad which are considered Sunnah. The Qur'an has 114 Surahs divided into 30 Juzee (chapters). Muslims treat the Qur'an with great reverence.

Muslims have five chief duties that are known as the Five Pillars of Islam:

1. Pronouncing the confession of faith (shahada): 'There is no God but the one God and Muhammad is his prophet'.
2. Praying five times daily facing Mecca, the holy city (salah).
3. Fasting during Ramadan, Islam's 9th month (saum).
4. Giving alms to the poor (zakat).
5. Make a major pilgrimage to Mecca once in life (hajj), when the necessary finances are available.

Overview of world religions

Food and drink are divided into two main categories, halal (lawful) and haram (unlawful).

Among forbidden food are all pork products and alcohol.

Diversity

There are many other religions that are practised throughout the world. Confucianism and Taoism are intrinsic to China. Jainism is one of the ancient religions of India. Shintoism is the state religion of Japan. Sikhism is derived from Hinduism and dates back to the second half of the 15th century where it started in the Punjab region of what is now Pakistan.

Wicca and New Age religions are a revival of pre-Christian nature beliefs and practices revolving around the seasons and the elements of earth, air, fire and water.

Developing respect for all spiritual beliefs

Learning to respect the many different religions of the world helps people to understand their own. Respecting those who do not practice a faith also challenges people to think about their own spiritual beliefs. On the other hand, religious fundamentalism can exist in all religions and can lead to a negation of the human values of justice and equality.

Values that unite people throughout the world need to be emphasised. Love, faith, hope, truth, justice, mercy, beauty, hospitality, generosity, compassion, understanding and respect are key. Sadly, understanding and respect are often ignored in a world torn by religious strife. How can there be true peace in the world when there is strife, not only among the world's faiths, but also within them?

Let us resolve to listen to what others believe, respect their viewpoint and seek the common path of love and compassion.

Women and religion

The position of women within the major world religions is an important issue. For many women, religion is a supportive and liberating framework within which they can express their spiritual beliefs. For many others, a formal religion inhibits their spiritual journey and acts as a barrier to their understanding of God and the divine and restricts their everyday life.

Religious attitudes to women as expressed in classical writings and as experienced in the various faith communities differ. There is often a contrast between the teaching of religions about the equality between men and women and the actual lived experience of women. Indeed, the founders of many religions were amazingly radical in their attitudes to women when seen against the background of their times. Jesus, the Buddha and Muhammad greatly enhanced the status of women.

Throughout history, men have formulated their beliefs, written sacred texts, interpreted the texts and controlled worship. Yet research in recent years has made known the role of women in their religious communities. As more women are trained to interpret sacred texts and to lead religious communities, religious history is balanced by their views and women can contribute as equals in contemporary religious life.

Many people, women and men, would dispute the fact that religions treat women as second class citizens. Yet culturally men have been regarded as superior to women for centuries and religion is no different.

Female sexuality is probably the most deep-seated cause of men's negative attitudes to women. Menstruation and childbirth have been regarded as polluting and in some traditions women are still forbidden to enter sacred places, to touch sacred objects or even to

prepare food during their period, during pregnancy or immediately after childbirth.

Generalisations are dangerous as they can be misleading. All religions express some ambivalence in relation to the role, status and essential nature of women. Yet every religion can point to outstanding, courageous women of earlier centuries and the present day.

Hinduism

Theoretically, women have always been respected within Hinduism. Women are seen as equal to men. In practice, it is different. Women have been relegated to the background and expected to stay at home to do all the domestic chores: bringing up children, cooking, cleaning and working in the fields. A woman's day lasts for anything up to 16 hours.

Today women are asserting themselves. Gender discrimination is less fashionable and empowerment is on the way in. Despite this, very few women in India can perform 'puja' in temples. There are female sanyasanis, sadhus and sadhivis but no female high priests worshipping in the temples.

Judaism

Judaism teaches that both men and women are created in the image of God. However, the role of women within Judaism is mixed.

The primary role of women in Orthodox Judaism is as a wife and mother, roles that are highly esteemed. For Orthodox Jews, Jewish identity is passed from the mother to her children. Within Orthodox Judaism women have a limited role within the life of the synagogue. They are not obligated to attend formal religious services. They cannot participate in many aspects of the service and

Women and religion

so their presence does not count towards a minyan (the ten people necessary to recite certain prayers).

In Reform Judaism, women are allowed to be rabbis. Reform Jewish women are encouraged to play a full role within society.

Buddhism

When Buddhism was founded, women were expected to stay at home to look after their families and to guide the children in matters of faith. This was seen to be a very responsible role and the rest of the family appreciated the contribution made by them. However, this did not mean that women were confined to the home, although none of them held professional posts. Buddha taught that men and women were equal in matters of belief and ethical conduct, generosity and wisdom. Whilst some women worked on the fields, others participated in great debates on philosophical matters, others prepared meals for the clergy, listened to sermons and discussed the teachings of the Buddha. In return they received the greatest gift, the gift of Dhamma. Some women became nuns and carried the message of Buddhism across the country and to neighbouring countries too. They contributed hugely to the strength, vitality and expansion of Buddhism and the Buddhist world owes them a large debt of gratitude.

Christianity

The role of women in Christianity throughout the world is mixed. Many western Protestant and Anglican churches now include women in all leadership roles (pastor, priest and bishop). Other western Protestant churches are still very restrictive and women's roles are confined to the home. Orthodox and Roman Catholics are cautiously expanding the opportunities for women, but not for the priesthood.

What is certain is that Jesus treated women with great respect. He offered them friendship and broke many negative taboos of his day surrounding women. Women were the first to proclaim the news of the resurrection of Jesus from the dead and were important figures in the early churches.

Islam

Islam teaches that men and women are of the same nature, possess the same soul and have equal intellectual and moral ability. Men and women have the same responsibilities although they have different roles in life.

From a true Islamic point of view, a woman is highly regarded and respected. A woman is only seen as inferior to a man when the instructions and teachings of Islam are misinterpreted.

Prayer

Prayer is communication with God, by whatever name God is called. From the beginning of recorded history, people have called upon their God or gods in times of trouble and need, when they are frightened, when they are overcome with awe, when they are filled with joy and thanksgiving. And people believe that God responds.

Prayer is often spontaneous. It is a beautiful day when all of nature seems bright and full of promise, instinctively we say thank you. The clear night sky is bright with zillions of stars, filled with awe and aware of how little we know about them and how far away they are in time and space, we gasp in wonder before our Creator. We are on a busy highway when a speeding car appears out of nowhere, hurtling towards us, instinctively we exclaim, *'Oh my God!'* When a friend tells us about a family tragedy or we hear on the radio of a disaster far away, we think, *"Please God, help them."* These intuitive prayers come with a heartfelt immediacy when we trust in God as one who cares.

There are many books of collections of prayers that have been written over the centuries by people around the world. Their prayers speak for all of us in words that we often find hard to express.

Worship

The formal worship of most of the world's religions assumes the gathering of the faithful to pray together. Prayer becomes multi-layered. There is the solid foundation of the expression of traditional thought-forms in the relationship of the whole community to their God. Added to this is the life of the contemporary community at worship. Woven throughout the past and present are the deepest personal hopes, thanksgivings and

fears of the individuals who make up the congregation.

Some people find the repetition of the same words mechanical and meaningless. To others it makes the worship experience rich with tradition, giving stability and continuity in a fragmented world. Evelyn Underhill, an Englishwoman and mystic who led many retreats before her death in 1941, says in *The Mount of Perfection*, *'We are released from a narrow selfish outlook on the universe by a common act of worship. Our little human affairs are reduced to their proper proportion when set over the spaceless Majesty and Beauty of God.'*

Prayers from different faiths

The single syllable AUM is sacred to Hindus. In one sense it means nothing, yet in another it means everything since it stands for Brahman, the Absolute and Creator. Used in private and public worship, it is beloved by every devout Hindu almost from birth to death. In *Katha Upanishad I, ii*, we read, *'This syllable AUM is indeed Brahman. This syllable is the Highest. Whoever knows this syllable obtains all that he desires. This is the best support; this is the highest support. Whoever knows this syllable is adored in the world of Brahma.'* In Hinduism, sacred utterances are called *'mantras'*. Mantras are identified with deities and are key to all Hindu rituals.

Muslims learn about prayer from infancy. Writing about Muslim spirituality, Saadoa Khawar Khan Chisti, says *'...a spiritual mother nurtures the soul of her child with the powerful effect of the recitation of the Shahadah, the oft-repeated prayer, and the beautiful Names or attributes of God by singing them as a lullaby for putting the child to sleep or for comforting a wailing or a disturbed child. In*

Prayer

doing so, the mother makes her contribution in permeating the very being of the child with the most powerful words of the Qur'an.¹

Muslims repeat the Shahadah many times daily: *'There is no Allah but Allah, and Muhammad is Allah's prophet.'*

Jews and Christians share the Psalms. They contain prayers of deep sorrow yet also great joy. 'Let everything that has breath praise the Lord!' Jewish prayers are often benedictions, words of blessing as in 'Blessed are you who creates the fruit of the vine,' that is said over wine. Similar words are recited over other food. Jews are directed to pray three times daily and the basic prayer is the Shema, the confession of God's unity,

'Hear, O Israel, the Lord is our God, the Lord our one God, and you must love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength...'

The most common prayer for Christians is the Lord's Prayer, a prayer that Christians believe Jesus gave to his disciples. It begins: 'Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name...'. In a few words it covers an astonishing breadth of ideas: personal relationship to God, recognition of God's holiness, a longing for God's peace, guidance, entreaty for daily needs, forgiveness, help with right relationships with others, protection from evil and hope of eternity.

Although Buddhism is not a theistic religion, Buddhist sacred literature includes many beautiful meditations on wisdom, love, peace, and enlightenment and right behaviour.

Prayers of different faith communities can be adapted and adopted to share spiritual thoughts. The prayers of Zoroastrians with their worship of Ahura Mazda, the Supreme Being and Creator are often widely suitable. Prayers from primal African sources have an earthy, familial characteristic similar to prayers of Celtic Christians. North American aboriginal

prayers, like some Japanese prayers, are strongly inspired by a closeness to and appreciation of nature.

There are different types of prayer: prayers of thanksgiving, prayers of praise, prayers of petition and prayers of intercession for others. A woman tells of being in hospital. In her fear she prayed desperately but she still felt isolated. Later, when she told her feelings to a friend, the friend replied, 'What makes you think you were praying alone?' The woman had forgotten her circle of caring friends. Knowing that others are praying for you is a source of great strength.

Prayer brings us nearer to God. Our intercessions for those whom we know and those whom we know only by their need bring us closer to all humankind.

Meditation

Prayer is more than words. Just as we can communicate with a close friend without speaking, we can communicate with God in stillness and silence. This is the practice of spiritual silence called meditation. It is an alert waiting upon God, emptying the mind of distractions to focus upon the divine, being in the present moment and not worrying about the past or the future. Some people repeat one sacred word as a means of fixing all our energy on the One who listens.

Meditation is particularly important for Buddhists. Through meditation Buddhists believe that will achieve tranquillity of mind, peace and contentment which in turn inspires confidence and inner calm. This enables them to reach higher levels of mental development and finally a state of enlightenment.

Meditation is also very important to Hindus. The Rishi Munnis performed meditation for years and achieved enlightenment. Even in Jainism, Mahaveer performed meditation for over a decade.

Prayer

Many people find it easier to meditate when they are in beautiful surroundings. The natural world can evoke both prayer and meditation. Prayer as work and work as prayer.

We can offer our daily work to God as a form of prayer. If we do this consciously, we will try to be honest and diligent about the tasks before us and treat with respect everyone we encounter. Prayer can be understood as action. For example, Mother Theresa's sisters in Calcutta have a sign on their wall that reads, *'O Lord, let me pray my work.'*

Some people devote their lives to the work of prayer. They are called monks or nuns. They often live together in religious communities such as monasteries or convents and they pray for the world at set times of the day. Christian monks and nuns follow particular prayers laid out by the founder of their religious orders e.g. the Benedictines, Jesuits, Sisters of Mercy, Dominicans and Carmelites.

¹Islamic Spirituality: Foundations

Cults

What is a cult?

The term cult is applied to a wide range of groups. There are historical cults, such as the cult of Isis, cults studied by anthropologists such as the Melanesian cargo cults and a host of contemporary cults that have caught the public's attention during the last few years.

The term 'cult' originally referred to a particular form or system of religious worship. Indeed, sociologists classify cults as protoreligions. People may join them because they are looking for answers to the meaning of life or because they wish to enhance their understanding of the spiritual dimension.

More recently our understanding of cults has taken on additional connotations, much of which is negative. In this context contemporary cults are likely to exhibit three characteristics to varying degrees:

- The excessively zealous, unquestioning commitment of members to the identity and leadership of the group.
- Exploitative manipulation of members
- Harm or danger to members, their families and/or society.

Who joins cults and why?

Although there is no easily identifiable type of person who joins cults, adolescents and young adults are key targets. This is because they are negotiating a stressful development stage, searching for meaning and identity. A cult can appear to offer answers. But cult members include the young, the old, the wealthy, the poor, the educated and the uneducated. Other factors that may make a person more susceptible to cultic influence

include: dependency, unassertiveness, gullibility, cultural disillusionment, naïve idealism, the desire for spiritual meaning and susceptibility to trance-like states. The cult may manipulate these vulnerabilities in order to persuade an individual to join and ultimately to renounce their old lives including their friends and family.

Social conditioning versus mind control

Social conditioning is the process by which parents, schools, churches and organizations such as WAGGGS promote and encourage the growth of a person from childhood through adolescence to adulthood. It honours the autonomy of the person being influenced.

Mind control, used by cults, employ techniques that persuade and control an individual, regardless of the needs or wishes of the person being influenced. The autonomy and identity of the individual is ignored.

It is important to recognise that cults are not all alike, nor are all cult members affected in the same way even within the same group. The process by which cults exercise mind control over members is complex and varies a great deal. However, there appears to be three overlapping stages:

Deception. Recruits are deceived into thinking that the group is kind and will enrich their lives by advancing their spirituality or increasing their self-esteem and security.

Dependency. Members are isolated from outside influences, unrealistic and guilt-inducing expectations are placed upon them and negative independent or critical thinking is punished.

Cults

Dread. Members dread losing the psychological support of the group. They sometimes fear physical punishment too.

Leaving a cult

It is not easy to leave a cult because members are pressured to stay. Most people do eventually leave of their own accord and professional counselling is available to them in some countries. Where counselling is not an option, parents and other helpers such as youth leaders or clergy may be able to assist cult members to re-evaluate their commitment to the group by talking with them in a calm, respectful manner. It is important to demonstrate love and concern and respect for the other's point of view whilst expressing your own. Be patient and keep the lines of communication open. Help the person to reconnect to her old life by talking about old times and encouraging her to write, to call or to visit relatives and friends.

What can be done to protect young people from cultic recruitment?

This is an important question and should concern all those who work with Girl Guides/ Girl Scouts. Youth leaders can help protect young people:

- By being unafraid to criticise cultic abuses
- By teaching about cultic manipulation
- By helping young people to cultivate three values that will make them less vulnerable to cultic enticements: personal autonomy, understanding of self and independent critical thinking. Membership of WAGGGS ensures that these values are encouraged.



Festivals and celebrations

Purpose

To learn more about global festivals and celebrations.

Materials needed

Paper, pens, cardboard, glue, henna, magazine pictures, props as appropriate.

What to do

Read the background materials to each activity and then divide participants into groups to explore each activity described.

A. Greeting

Did you ever notice that the simple greeting of other people and bidding them farewell are like small celebrations? Some cultures put great importance on greeting, using set gestures and phrases and playing close attention to those being greeted. The usual English word of farewell, 'goodbye', is a contraction of 'God be with you'. In French 'au revoir' is literally translated 'until I see you again.' In Siswati (Swaziland) 'hamba kahle' means 'go well.'

Activities

Demonstrate your usual method of greeting a friend and then how you greet a stranger. Is there a difference? What difference does your way of greeting people make? How many ways of greeting people have you experienced? Demonstrate how you usually bid someone farewell. How do your farewells help others to feel good about themselves?

B. Planting and harvesting

Common to many cultures are festivals attached to the sowing of crops or fishing boats putting out to sea. The whole community meets together in solidarity to bless the workers and to pray for good weather and a plentiful harvest.

At harvest time when the crops are gathered in or the fish prepared for eating or preservation, a festival of thanksgiving is held with great rejoicing. The community expresses its gratitude to the workers and to God for the food for the coming season.

Activities

Create a festival to celebrate harvest-time in your locality. Use traditional customs as well as some you invent.

The work of our hands involves much more than raising food crops. Think of what else we produce in this modern world, especially where you live. Create a festival to include thanks for these workers and their services or products.

C. Major religious festivals

All religions celebrate events they feel are important to remember and pass on to succeeding generations. Some are of such solemnity and special significance that they are reserved for the members, but other celebrations are open to the whole community to join and to enjoy.

Many religious festivals are celebrated at home and with the wider community. They commonly use words (rites) and actions (ceremonies) that are traditional. Since festivities usually involve universal aspects of



Festivals and celebrations

delight like food, colour, music and the gathering of friends, they are excellent occasions for learning to appreciate and to enjoy each other's differences.

Activities

Following are brief descriptions of a few festivals from several religions. Find out more about them. Perhaps someone will let you join their celebration. Invite someone from another culture to observe or to participate in your festivals.

Judaism

Rosh haShana takes place at the Jewish New Year which occurs at the new moon near the fall equinox.

Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement, is celebrated ten days after Rosh haShana.

Hanukkah commemorates the rededication of the temple after the victory of the Maccabaeans over the enemy in 165 B.C., comes around the winter solstice and lasts for eight days.

Pesach (Passover) follows the spring equinox and marks the Exodus from Egypt and the freeing of the Israelites.

Christianity

Easter follows the spring equinox and celebrates the resurrection of Jesus from the dead.

Christmas, in December, celebrates the birth of Jesus Christ.

Pentecost marks the birthday of the Christian church when Christians remember the coming of the Holy Spirit 50 days after Easter.

Islam

Ramadan occurs at different times of the year and is a month of fasting and repentance, as well as feeding the needy.

Eid El Fitr is the three-day celebration that follows Ramadan. People wear new clothes and go to the mosque to pray special prayers early in the morning. Relatives and friends visit and entertain each other.

Hajj, the annual pilgrimage to Mecca, is the duty of Muslims to make once in a lifetime. It commemorates the Prophet Muhammad's journey from Mecca to Medhina.

Muharram is the Islamic New Year, a time of hope and renewal.

Hinduism

Diwali, in October or November, is the eve of the Hindu New Year and symbolises the triumph of good over evil. It commemorates Ram's victory over the demon Ravana and Ram's Abhisekh or coronation ceremony.

Holi is the festival of colours and heralds the arrival of spring.

Vasanta Pan-Chami/Saraswati Puja marks the beginning of spring and is also dedicated to Saraswati, goddess of the arts and education. Raksha Bandhan celebrates the love of brother and sister. The sister ties a bracelet of woven threads called a rakhi around her brother's wrist. In return he promises to protect her.

Buddhism

Vesak Day falling on the day of the full moon in May celebrates the Birth, Enlightenment and Death of Buddha.



Festivals and celebrations

Activities

Discuss the common elements in religious festivals. What deeply held viewpoints do they illustrate?

If your group shares a common festival, tell the different ways in which they celebrate it.

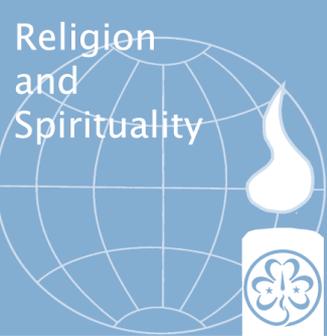
MAKE A DREIDEL the spinning top that is a favourite game at Hanukkah. Mark a 10.5 cm square of light cardboard diagonally into four. Print the Hebrew letters Nun, Gimel, Hay and Shin on each segment. These are the initial letters of Nes Gadol Hayah Sham, i.e. a great miracle happened here. They also stand for the Yiddish words Nisht (nothing), Gantz (everything), Halb (half) and Shtel (put in). Push a short, sharp pencil through a hole in the centre of the cardboard so that you can spin it. Place a small pile of tokens (pebbles, buttons, chips) in the middle. Give each player some. The players take turns spinning the dreidel and follow the directions on the side uppermost when it stops, i.e., take nothing, take all, take half, put one token in. Play until someone wins all the tokens.

HENNA BODY PAINTING has spiritual significance in Hinduism. Women apply henna on their hands and feet for festivals and religious ceremonies. Women apply alta, a red colour on their heels and toes at times of festivals. Red is an auspicious colour. A bridegroom also has henna on his hand when the nuptial knot is tied between the hands of bride and bridegroom.

AN ADVENT CALENDAR will help you count down the days until Christmas.

Advent, meaning “coming”, is the four weeks (including four Sundays) before Christmas when Christians await the birth of Jesus Christ.

You will need two sheets of heavy paper or light cardboard. Mark the top one with windows as shown. Cut three sides of each window but do not open. On the bottom piece of cardboard draw or glue little pictures appropriate to the season so that they are exactly under the windows. Glue the top to the bottom around the edges only. Open one window each day in Advent until Christmas Day. The picture and window for it can be larger than the others. Each day is a surprise. You can arrange the pictures to make a story and have a script to read each day.



Faith in action

Purpose

To look at stories of women and men from around the world whose faith has influenced their life.

Materials needed

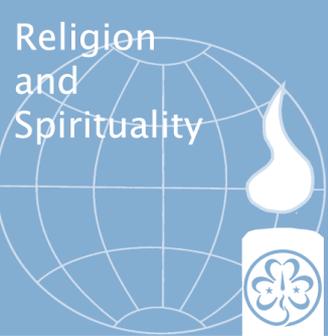
Stories of famous and ordinary people taken from books, newspapers, magazines, videos etc. These need to be assembled by participants in advance of this exercise.

What to do

Encourage participants to collect stories of women and men world-wide whose faith has knowingly influenced their lives. Some people will be famous such as Archbishop Desmond Tutu and Nelson Mandela who struggled to abolish the apartheid regime in South Africa; Emmeline Pankhurst who secured the vote for women in the UK; Joan of Arc who led the French to defeat the English; Mahatma Gandhi who promoted non-violence in India and Pakistan; Martin Luther King who called for civil rights for black people in the USA; Mother Theresa who cared for the poor in India; Aung San Suu Kyi who continues to lead the pro-democracy movement in Burma (Myanmar). Other people will be less well known or not known at all. Consider those who work for the French-based organization, Medecins Sans Frontiers who provide medical aid to refugees; or those who work diligently for the relief of political prisoners through Amnesty International; the countless Europeans who hid Jews during World War II at great personal risk; the Argentine mothers who march to keep alive the memory of their missing sons.

Working in small groups, invite people to discuss the following questions. Then gather everyone together to compare notes in a general discussion.

- What motivated the person/people of faith?
- What character traits did they demonstrate?
- Why did they act when others stood back or seemed not to care?
- Was their gender a factor in their decision to act?
- What factors make it seemingly easier for some people to maintain or to regain hope?
- What one thing can you learn from the examples looked at that you can introduce into your own life? How will you do this?



Spiritual journeys

Purpose

To encourage people to talk about their own spiritual journey.

Materials needed

Something symbolic for each individual from their spiritual journey

What to do

Most of the world religions have a time of year devoted to self examination. It is an opportunity for people to look back on their relationship with God and with each other. For Christians, that time is called Lent. For Moslems it is Ramadan. For Buddhists it is the observation of Sil. For Hindus there are also times of self introspection and self purification: Navratri, Shivratri and Janamasthmi. Often such a time involves fasting and doing good deeds for others. People try to spend more time in prayer or in meditation.

Ask participants whether they have a time of self examination within their faith tradition. Do they think it is a good idea? What benefits can they see?

Invite each person to show the symbol that they have brought with them that is important for them on their spiritual journey. Encourage people to talk about the symbol and to explain its significance. Take plenty of time over this exercise.



Prayers

Purpose

To offer a selection of prayers from different faith traditions for people to use as a group or alone.

Materials needed

Prayers, candles, music, religious pictures from different faith traditions.

What to do

If you intend to offer people the experience of praying together, invite them to get comfortable and pray as seems appropriate to them. There is no right or wrong way to pray.

Prayers of Adoration

*I light a candle,
The light shines out,
The candle is transformed,
The spirit gives of herself,
We all receive.*

St Hilda Community, UK (Christian)

*We say: 'Thank you' today.
And tomorrow. And all days.
We do not tire in giving thanks to you.*

A Masai prayer, Kenya (Traditional)

To God belongs the praise, Lord of the heavens and Lord of the earth, the Lord of all being. His is the dominion in the heavens and in the earth. He is the Almighty, the ever-wise.

Qur'an, Surah 45:35 (Muslim)

Let everything that has breath praise the Lord.

Psalm 150 (Jewish and Christian)

May His great Name grow exulted and sanctified

In the world that He created as He willed. May He give reign to His kingship in your lifetimes and in your days and in the lifetimes of the entire family of Israel, swiftly and soon. May His great Name be blessed forever and ever.

Blessed, praised, glorified, exulted, extolled, mighty.

Kaddish (Jewish)

Prayers for Peace

*Let all be happy, all be free from disease
Let everything look well. No sorrow should get in
Let happiness prevail everywhere!
O god let there be
Peace, peace, peace.*

Hindu

*O God of many names
Lover of all nations
We pray for peace
in our hearts
in our homes
in our nations
in our world
The peace of your will
The peace of our need.*

George Appleton, UK (Christian)

The world abounds in war horses; let the day come when they will be used only to fertilise fields. Our nations hold a multitude of weapons; let us pray that they be shunned as omens of evil. People yearn for power; let us hope that more and more of us will find contentment in our daily lives. Let us listen to our own prayers. It is we who will make them real.

Deng Ming Dao (Shinto)



Prayers

We believe that as Christians we are called to be peace-makers, in the true peace which God promises us.

We believe that this may sometimes mean 'disturbing the peace' as Jesus did, for a purpose - to restore the purpose of God.

We believe that our Pacific ways are also a gift from God; we are invited to use the values of our Pacific culture to build societies of justice and peace.

We express these beliefs, reminded of the love of God, the grace of Christ and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit.

Women of the Pacific (Christian)

Prayers for Daily Life

*I shall strive to cleanse my heart
from hate and envy,
and live in harmony with all people.
I shall be close to the Dhamma,
in good as well as in difficult times.
I know that should the moment
come for me to leave the world,
I shall do so without fear or regret
because I leave the world a better person
than when I came into it.
Whatever wrong someone may do to me,
may I be compassionate and forgive and
bear no hatred in my heart.
I shall bear in mind to be grateful
for the acts of love and consideration
shown to me,
No matter how small they appear to be.
For those I love and those who love me,
may this life be a blessing and
a source of happiness to all beings.*

Buddhist

*God, give us grace to accept with serenity
the things that cannot be changed
Courage to change the things that should
be changed
and the wisdom to know the difference.*

Reinhold Niebuhr (Christian)

*God, give me work till my life shall
end,
And life till my work is done.*

A favourite prayer of Olave Baden-Powell
(Christian)

*Bless and protect me oh Goddess Saraswati,
white as Kundo flower, silvery as moonlight,
white as ice, clad in all white garments
having 'Veena' in hands seated on white
lotus, ever worshipped by Brahma Vishnu,
Maheswara and other Gods. Do away with
all my inertia and inactivity.*

Hindu

*O Lord, forgive us, have mercy upon us,
pardon us, hear us, provide for us, console
us and be a shield for us. Amen.*

Muslim

Prayers for Creation

Hymn of the Earth

*Earth, in which lie the sea, the river and
other waters,
In which food and cornfields have come to
be,
In which lives all that breathes and that
moves,
May she confer on us the finest of her yield.*

*Earth in which all waters, common to all,
Moving on all sides, flow unfailingly, day
and night,
May she pour on us milk in many streams,
And endow us with lustre.*

*May those born of thee, O Earth,
Be for our welfare, free from sickness and
waste.*

*Wakeful through a long life, we shall
become
Bearers of tribute to thee.*

*Earth, my mother, set me securely with bliss
In full accord with heaven,
O wise one,
Uphold me in grace and splendour.*

From the Atharva Veda (Hindu)

Prayers

Lord God, creator of the earth, you have given us the mountains and trees, the water and the good earth which supports our crops, our animals and ourselves. Never let us lose our love for our land which is our mother.

Help us to protect the land from abuse and to enrich the soil when we abuse it.

Make our mother the earth fruitful again.

A Filipino Tribal Prayer (Traditional)

Tender God, touch us.

Be touched by us;

Make us lovers of humanity,

Compassionate friends of all creation.

Gracious God, hear us into speech;

Speak us into acting;

And through us, recreate the world.

Amen.

Carter Heyward (Christian)

Prayers to Celebrate Women

Broken silence

O women whose voices have never been heard:

We repent of our deafness,

We confess our stubborn hearts and closed minds.

O women whose words have been consigned to silence:

We grieve for the wisdom which has been lost.

O women whose wisdom has not been heeded:

We desire that our time will be different and We commit ourselves now to listen.

We will turn again to search out the scriptures.

We will look for the clues of your lives in the margins

Of history's pages.

We will seek out your words in secret places.

We will dig for your treasure hidden deep in the

Dark.

For we know our need of your wisdom.

We yearn for the restoration of what has been lost.

Our time is hungry for your forgotten stories,

For the ancient art of women's wisdom

Which will heal our hurt and may yet save our world.

Nicola Slee (Christian)

Blessing

Let those who are in misery

Be free from misery;

Let those who are in fear,

(agony and insecure)

be free from fear, agony and insecurity;

Let those who are in sorrow

Be free from sorrow and

Let all living beings be

Free from misery, fear and sorrow.

Buddhist