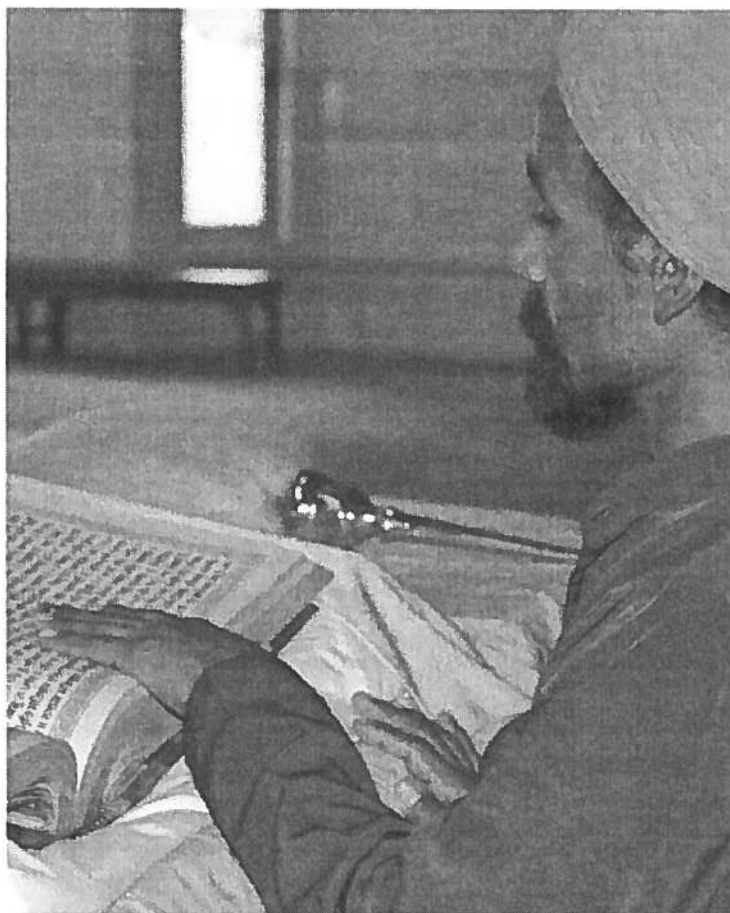


Jainism and Sikhism



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First Encounter

On a street in Southeast Asia you ask a gentleman for directions. This leads to further conversation because your accent gives you away and he has relatives in the United States. "Maybe you know them?" he asks. "Do you live close to Tennessee?"

Even though you don't know his relatives, you are soon learning all about his family. He has two sons, already married, and a willful daughter who is of marriageable age. He is frightened that she might fall in love with a person of a different religion, and then what will he do? Soon he is taking you into his nearby *gurdwara*—the religious center for Sikhs—where he will be doing volunteer work this afternoon and having something to eat.

At the entrance, your new friend takes a piece of orange cloth and makes a turban to cover the top of your head. He does the same for himself. "We do this for respect," he says. Upstairs, you meet the resident priest, a bright-eyed man in blue, who wears an orange cap. "Our congregation brought him from India to be our priest,"

your Sikh friend explains as you walk to the altar area. Soon the priest is showing you copies of the *Adi Granth*, the sacred book of the Sikhs. They are housed in a special air-conditioned sanctuary beside the altar. Then you see the sword collection at the side of the room and discuss the *kirpan* (ritual knife) that the priest wears. "Sikhs had to learn to defend themselves," your friend explains. "These are symbols of our strength."



Afterward, you are invited downstairs to an enormous kitchen and dining room. Large vats gleam. You and your friend sit at a long table, drinking tea with milk and eating a late-afternoon snack with the kitchen workers.

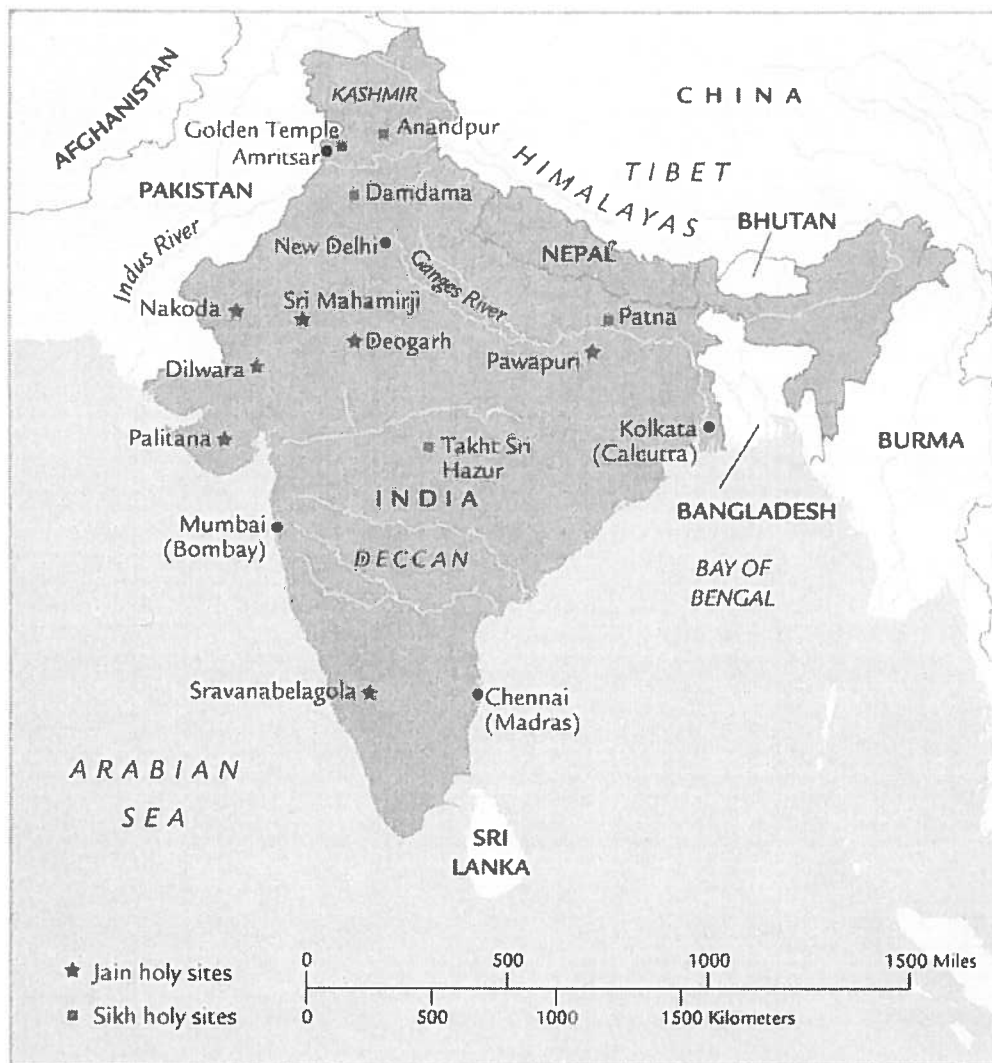
At the entrance, before leaving, you give back your turban to the Sikh guide and thank him for his kindness. You commiserate about his daughter and take the names and addresses of his relatives in the United States, whom you plan to contact on your very next visit to their state. He helps you find a taxi and, as it stops, invites you to a service three days from now. "There will be wonderful Sikh music. You must come." As you are climbing into the taxi, he adds, "There will be much good food, too."

Turbans, you decide as your taxi snakes through the traffic, are fine. But swords? And priests who wear knives? Are these suitable symbols for any religion? How can religions hold such differing attitudes about violence?

Shared Origins

India is home to two religions, Jainism and Sikhism, that are now becoming better known in the West (Figure 5.1). The first is ancient, and the other is relatively young. Adherents of the two religions can be found in limited numbers around the world, but the majority of them still live in India.

Figure 5.1 Jain and Sikh holy sites in India.



Both religions have some connection with Hinduism, sharing with it certain characteristics, such as a belief in karma and rebirth. Furthermore, both of them, having developed in opposition to Hindu polytheism and ritualism, strive toward greater religious simplicity. In spite of their similarities, however, Jainism and Sikhism differ in their views of reality and in their emotional tone. It is therefore interesting to look at them side by side. Jainism rejects belief in a Creator and sees the universe simply as natural forces in motion, yet it also recognizes the spiritual potential of each person. Like early Buddhism, Jainism emphasizes the ideals of extreme nonattachment and nonharm (ahimsa). Sikhism, to the contrary, embraces a devout monotheism and accepts meat eating and military self-defense. Regardless of their differences, both religions stress the importance of the individual's struggle to purify the self, to act morally, and to do good to others.

Jainism

Background

As the Vedic religion expanded eastward into the Ganges River valley, it created opposition. As we saw in Chapter 4, some people rebelled against the growing strength of the caste system, and nonbrahmins, especially the aristocrats, felt threatened by the power of the priests. Moved by compassion, some people opposed the animal sacrifices that were often a part of the Vedic ritual. Two great religious movements grew out of this opposition. One—Buddhism—is well known because it spread beyond India. The other movement—Jainism—has remained less well known because, until recently, it has not sought converts in other lands. When they arose, both Buddhism and Jainism were influenced by some early Hindu ideas, but they may have also practiced much older ascetic traditions.

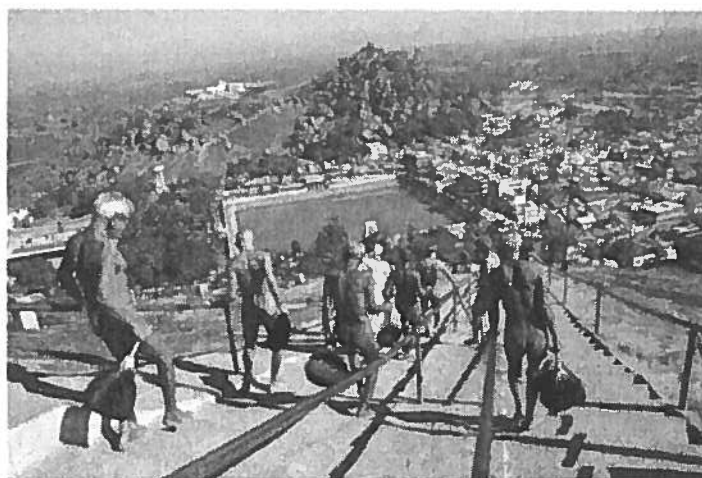
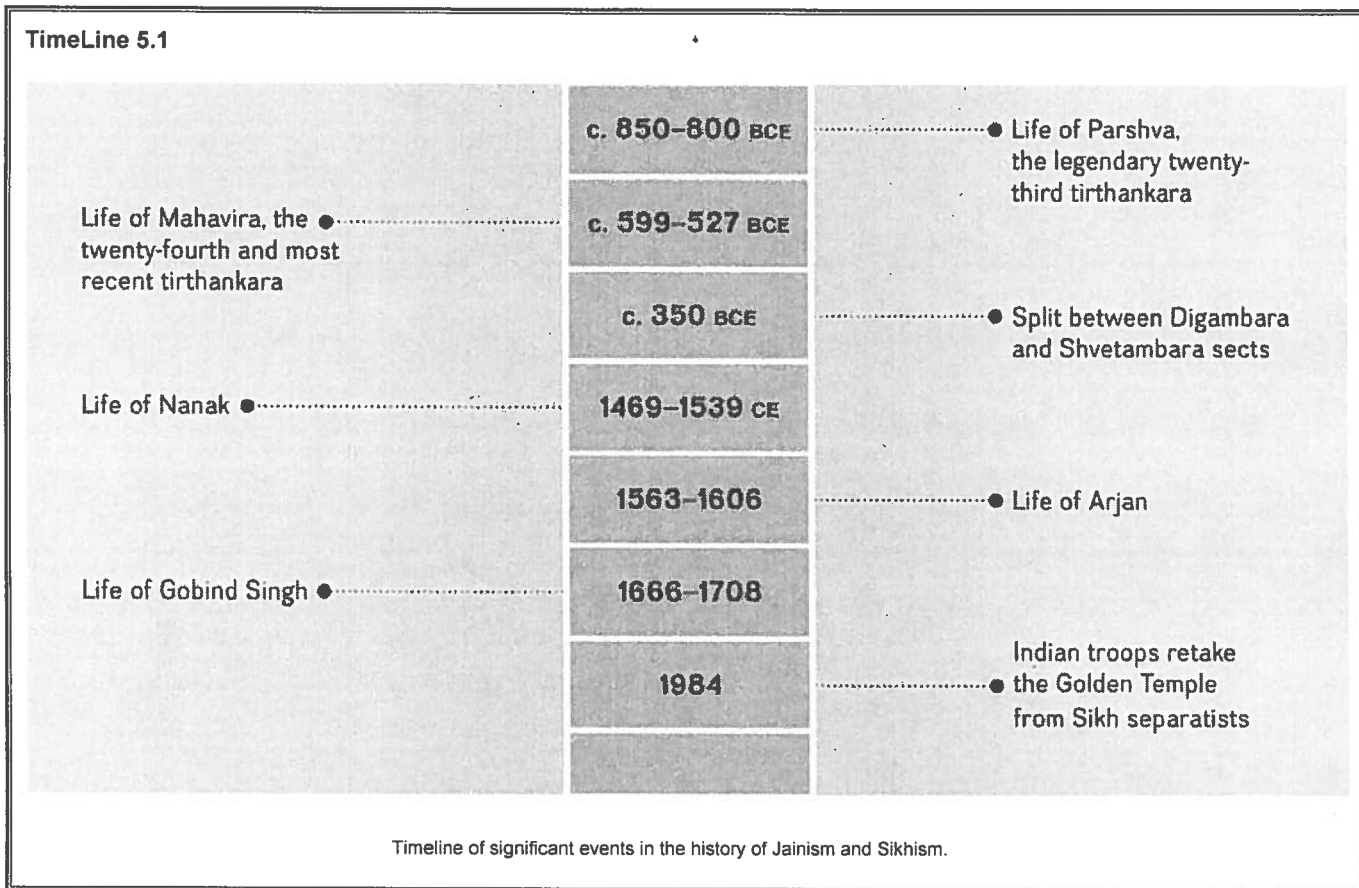
It is possible that Jainism has not spread widely because it is uncompromising: in it we find an extremist quality that is fascinating, thought provoking, and often noble. Tendencies toward nonviolence and austerity apparent in Hinduism and Buddhism are carried to their logical endpoint in Jainism, and the skepticism of early Buddhism is practiced rigorously. The study of Jainism, in fact, gives greater clarity to our understanding of those two other Indian religions.

Although Jainism did not spread widely, its strong ideal of nonviolence has attracted interest throughout the world. We see its influence directly in the thought and work of Mahatma Gandhi and, indirectly, in the thought and work of Martin Luther King Jr.

Mahavira and the Origins of Jainism

Jains date the origins of their religion to the distant past. They believe that in the present cycle of the universe, twenty-four great people have

reached perfection; and though living in quite different centuries, these saints have been role models and guides who have shown the way to others. These saints are called tirthankaras, which can be translated as “crossing makers” or “ford finders”—a ford being a shallow section of a river through which people can wade to the other side. It is notable that the term does not convey the image of a bridge. The point of the term is that people cannot cross to the other side without getting wet and going through the river itself. The historical existence of most of these tirthankaras cannot be proven, but the twenty-third one, Parshva, may have been a real person who lived in India, possibly between 850 and 800 BCE (Timeline 5.1).



Jain monks leave the pilgrimage center at Belagola in India.

© Jagadeesh Nv/Reuters/Corbis

The most recent tirthankara is considered to be the greatest of them all and is often thought of by outsiders to be the founder of Jainism. His name was Nataputta Vardhamana, but he is usually referred to by an honorary title: Mahavira, meaning “great man” or “hero.” When he lived is not entirely certain. An older dating, accepted by Jains, puts his life entirely in the sixth century BCE (c. 599–527 BCE), but some scholars believe he lived a bit later (540–468 bce), possibly as a contemporary of the Buddha.

Mahavira's life story is surrounded by legend, although the basic outline—which somewhat resembles the story of the Buddha—seems clear. He was born into an aristocratic family of a noble clan. Luckily, he was the second son and thus had fewer responsibilities to care for his parents than did his older brother. One branch of Jains holds that he never married; another says that he married and had a child. But all agree that he left home at about age 30 to live the life of a wandering holy man.

After leaving home, Mahavira embraced extreme asceticism, and legend tells of his harshness toward himself and of the harshness received from others. He is said to have pulled out his hair when he renounced the world, and villagers taunted him during his meditations by hurting him with fire and with pins that they pushed into his skin. Dogs attacked him, but he did not resist. In order to avoid all attachments to people and places, he moved to a new place every day; and after losing his loincloth, he went entirely naked for the rest of his life. He lived as a wandering holy man, begging for his food along the way. He was so gentle that to avoid causing injury to any living thing, he strained whatever he drank to keep from swallowing any insect that might have fallen into his cup, and he stepped carefully as he walked down a road to avoid crushing even an ant.

After twelve years of meditation, wandering, and extreme mortification, Mahavira, at the age of 42, had an experience of great liberation. He felt completely free of all bondage to the ordinary world—no longer being troubled by pain, suffering, shame, or loss. He now felt fully in control of himself, sensing that he had won out over all the forces that bind a person to the world.

As a result of his liberating experience, Mahavira is called a *jina* ("conqueror"). It is from this title that the religion Jainism takes its name.

Mahavira spent the next thirty years of his life teaching his doctrines and organizing an order of naked monks. He died at about 72 at the village of Pava, near present-day Patna, in northeastern India.

Worldview

Jainism, like Buddhism, rather starkly rejects belief in a Creator God. The Mahapurana, a long Jain poem of the ninth century CE, states that "foolish men declare that Creator made the world. The doctrine that the world was created is ill-advised and should be rejected."¹ Jainism offers the following philosophical arguments: If God is perfect, why did God create a universe that is imperfect? If God made the universe because of love, why is the world so full of suffering beings? If the universe had to be created, did not God also need to be created? And where did God come from in the beginning?

Jains respond to these questions by denying any beginning and asserting instead that the universe is eternal. Although the universe has always existed, it must continually change, and in the process of eternal change, structure arises on its own. Jainism (like Hinduism) teaches that the universe goes through regular great cycles of rise and fall. During the periods when human beings exist, there first is moral integrity, followed by inevitable moral decay; luckily, however, in each human age, tirthankaras appear to point the way to freedom.

According to Jainism, everything is full of life and is capable of suffering. This view of reality, called *hylozoism* (Greek: "matter-alive"), may be quite ancient. In addition, Jain philosophy is dualistic, for Jains teach that all parts of the universe are composed of two types of reality, which are intermixed. There is spirit, which senses and feels, and there is matter, which is not alive and has no consciousness. Jainism calls these two principles *jiva* ("soul," "spirit," "life") and *ajiva* ("nonsoul," "nonlife"). Jains, however, see life and consciousness where others do not—even in fire, rocks, and water. Thus they extend the notion of spirit and feeling beyond human beings, animals, and insects. They are also aware of the minuscule life-forms that live in earth, water, and wood. Their way of looking at reality makes Jains cautious about injuring anything—even that which does not at first appear to have the capacity to suffer.

Jainism sees the human being as composed of two opposing parts. The material side of the human being seeks pleasure, escape from pain, and self-interest, while the spiritual side seeks freedom and escape from all bondage to the material world and from the limitation of ego. Because other forms of reality are not aware of their two opposing aspects, they can do nothing about the essential incompatibility of the two parts. Human beings, however, have the ability to understand their dual nature and to overcome their limitations. With discipline, human beings can overcome the bondage of the material world and the body, liberating their spirits through insight, austerity, and kindness.

Enriching this vision of the human situation are the Jain beliefs in karma and reincarnation. Like Hindus, Jains believe that spirits are constantly being reborn in various forms. A spirit can move up or down the scale of rebirth, as well as free itself entirely from the chain of rebirths.

What controls the direction of rebirth is karma, which is produced by every action. As discussed earlier, karma is an important notion in Hinduism and Buddhism, but for Jains, karma has a quite physical quality: it is like a powder or grime that settles on and clings to the spirit. The level of rebirth is determined automatically, according to one's state of karma at the time of death of one's current body.

Jains traditionally have believed that superhuman beings exist in realms of the universe above the earth. Often these beings are called gods or deities, but such terms can be misleading. We must recall that Jains believe that these superhuman beings are also subject to karma and change. When the karma that has brought them rebirth as gods has run out, they will be reborn in lower parts of the universe. Some Jains, however, do believe that when in their superhuman form, these celestial beings can be of help to people on earth who pray to them. Jains also believe that some beings exist in painful realms below the earth, and Jains hope to avoid being reborn there.

The Jain goal is to reach a state of total freedom. Liberated spirits, at last freed of their imprisoning material bodies, live on in the highest realm, which is thought to be at the very top of the universe. Mahavira and other tirthankaras dwell there, and although they cannot assist human beings (as deities might), they are role models whom human beings devoutly recall in order to gain strength and courage.

Jain Ethics

Jainism has five ethical recommendations, which monks and nuns are expected to keep quite strictly. Laypeople, however, have the flexibility to adjust their practice to their particular life situations. (We must also recall that these are ideals that are not always lived out perfectly by individuals.)

The saint, with true vision, conceives compassion for all the world.... The great sage becomes a refuge for injured creatures, like an island which the waters cannot overwhelm.

Acaranga Sutra 1:6, 5²

Nonviolence (ahimsa) A more accurate English translation of *ahimsa* might be “gentleness” or “harmlessness.” Ahimsa is the foundation of Jain ethics, and Jains are best known for their extreme measures in this regard. Believing that Mahavira swept the ground in front of him as he walked and before he sat down, Jain monks and nuns sometimes use a small, soft brush to move ants and other insects out of the way so that no life-form—even the tiniest—will be crushed. Feeling a kinship with the animal world as well, Jains have established hospitals to care for sick animals. They have been known to buy caged animals and set them free. Jains are also strict vegetarians, and some reject the use of animal products such as leather, feathers, and fur.

Because Jain laypeople avoid occupations that would harm insects or animals, hunting and fishing are forbidden, as are slaughtering or selling animal flesh. And although some Jains are farmers, farming is often avoided because the necessary plowing could hurt small animals and insects living in the fields. Jains, instead, have gravitated to careers that ideally cause no harm, such as medicine, education, law, and business. As an indirect result, the Jains in India make up a powerful business class whose reputation for virtue earns them the trust of others. *Nonlying* Jainism discourages the telling of any falsehood and avoids exaggeration, even when meant humorously. Lying and exaggeration are dangerous, Jains think, because they often cause hurt. Although these ideals are not always followed, Jains’ general mindfulness of their speech and their reputation for honesty in their contractual agreements have earned them great respect.

Deeper Insights: Jains and a Holy Death

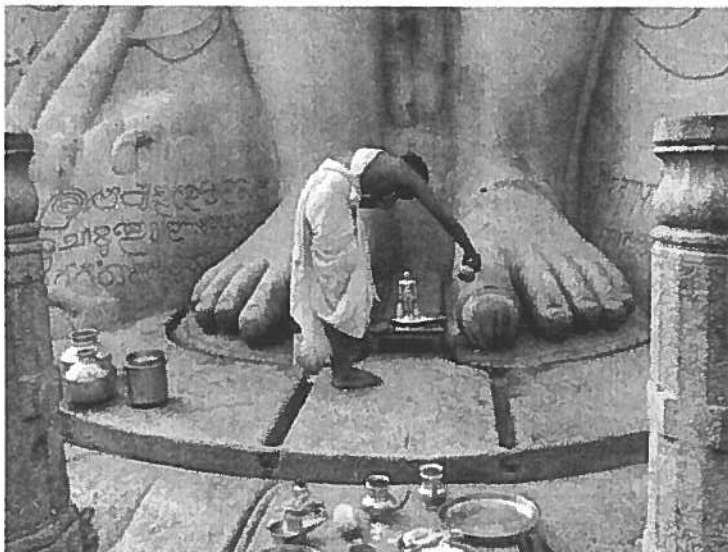
Because it so values nonattachment, Jainism defends a person’s right to end his or her own life. (This is also true of Hinduism, but not so for many other religions—although most religions are indeed concerned with a good and holy death.) Jain scriptures even teach that Mahavira and his parents died by self-starvation. We must be cautious here, however, in using the word *suicide*. Jains do accept ending one’s own life, but we must understand the practice from the Jain point of view and within that context. Jains see all life as a preparation for the liberation of the spirit (*jiva*) from the body, and when a person is sufficiently evolved spiritually, that person can make the final choice to no longer create more karma.

The Jain ideal thus allows and esteems ending one’s life only after a long life of virtue and detachment, and it must be done with consideration for others. Gentle methods of ending one’s life are the best, such as walking into an ocean or lake. The most highly esteemed method, however, is self-starvation, called *sallekhana*, “holy death.” Jains prepare for *sallekhana* over the years by practicing fasting. When a person is old and growing weak, eating less and less is seen as an appropriate way to hasten the end. Self-starvation, or “the final fast,” involves giving up food but continuing to drink liquids. Death comes in about a month. This kind of death by self-starvation is considered an ultimate, noble expression of nonattachment and freedom.

At the same time, Jainism teaches that “absolute truth” is impossible to find or express, because everyone sees a situation from a unique point of view. A famous story illustrates the relativity of truth. In this story, several blind people touch the same elephant, but they experience it quite differently. The first person touches the ear and says it is a fan; the second person touches the leg and says it is a tree trunk; the third person touches the tail and says it is a rope; and so on. (Although this story is popular among Jains, it is doubtless older than Jainism itself.)

Nonstealing Jains may not take from others that which is not given. Stealing arises from improper desire and causes pain to others.

Chastity For the monk or nun, this means complete celibacy, and for the married individual, this means sexual fidelity to one’s spouse. Mahavira saw sex as a danger, because it strongly binds a person to the physical world, strengthens desires, and can create passions that harm others. For those who are sexually active, improper sex is that which hurts others. *Nonattachment* Human beings form attachments easily—to family, to home, to familiar territory, to clothes, to money, and to possessions.



A devotee anoints the feet of a Jain statue. The vines on each side (showing at the top corners of the photograph) hint at the immobility and perseverance of the tirthankara.

© Paul Stepan/Photo Researchers, Inc.

Jainism asserts that all attachments bring a certain bondage and that some attachments, especially to money and to possessions, can take complete control of a person. For laypeople, the ethical requirement of nonattachment suggests cultivating a spirit of generosity and detachment and limiting one's possessions to what is truly necessary. For monks and nuns, this requirement is interpreted more severely. Jainism teaches that Mahavira abandoned all attachments—family, possessions, even his clothing—and that monks and nuns must imitate him to the best of their capacity.

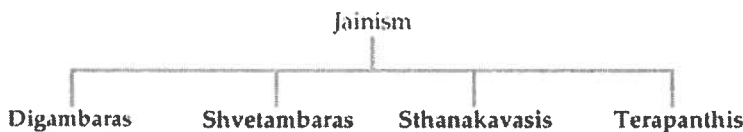
The Development of Jainism and its Branches

Jainism first developed in northeastern India, in the same area that gave rise to Buddhism. Both Mahavira and the Buddha rebelled against aspects of Vedic religion: they refused to accept the authority of the Vedas and the Vedic gods, and they rejected the importance of a priestly class; instead, they placed emphasis on meditation and self-purification.

Although Buddhism followed a deliberate path of moderation—a “middle way”—Jainism gloried in austerity. While the Buddha rejected both nakedness and suicide, as well as all extreme austerity, Mahavira's breakthrough experience of liberation, most Jains believe, was due to his extreme harshness toward himself. He was successful precisely because he accepted—and even sought—cold, heat, poverty, nakedness, and humiliation.

The way of extreme austerity, however, is for rare individuals only. For most people, even for monks and nuns, the harshness must be softened according to life's circumstances. Because Jainism spread to different parts of India, each with its distinct culture and climate, several branches of Jainism arose, which interpret the basic principles and teachings with some variation (Figure 5.2).

Figure 5.2 Branches of Jainism.



Digambaras

The name of this sect is beautiful and means “clothed in sky” or “atmosphere-clad.” It is a pleasant way of referring to the monks' ideal of going completely naked, even in public. The Digambara branch holds that everything must be renounced, including the last scrap of clothing and the consequent shame of nakedness.

Most members of this branch live in southern India today. As tradition explains, a famine that occurred in the north drove many Jains southward. Divergences developed between those who had remained in the north and those who had moved south. Thinking that northern followers had lost an essential seriousness, the southern branch became conservative, continuing to insist on renunciation of the most literal type. Its conservatism shows itself in many ways. For example, Digambara Jainism does not accept women into monastic life, holding that they may become monks only when they have been reborn as men. Possibly because of its high regard for celibacy, it also rejects the tradition that Mahavira was ever married.

Shvetambaras

The name of this sect means “clothed in white” and comes from the fact that its monks dress in white robes. The Shvetambara branch allows women to enter monastic life as nuns and to dress in white as well. (Being clothed was allowed not only in deference to modesty but also because it was demanded by the colder climate of northern India.) Shvetambara Jainism teaches that Mahavira was indeed married at one time but that he left home to find liberation. Nowadays this branch has members not only in the northeast but also in western and northwestern India.

Sthanakavasis

By the standards of India, the Sthanakavasi branch is fairly young, having grown up within the past few hundred years. It is a reform movement that emerged from the Shvetambara branch in the early eighteenth century. Popular Jainism had increasingly developed the practice of venerating statues of Mahavira and other tirthankaras, influenced by the Hindu practice of puja (devotional ritual performed in front of statues and at altars). Some Jain reformers opposed this practice because it seemed to turn the tirthankaras into deities to be prayed to for help. The Sthanakavasis, therefore, do not make use of either temples or images. (Their name comes from the simple buildings—*sthanakas*—in which they meet.) Rather than concentrate on temple ceremony, Sthanakavasis focus on meditation and individual austerities.

Terapanthis

An even newer reformist movement is the Terapanthi branch. It was founded by Acharya Bhikshu (1726–1803), also called Swami Bhikkanji Maharaj. The origin of the name Terapanthi, which means “thirteen,” is debated. It may come from the thirteen moral principles outlined by the founder or from the number of persons comprising the earliest disciples. Like the Sthanakavasis, the Terapanthis reject the use of images. To ensure discipline, the founder instituted a hierarchical structure with a supreme guru, the *Acharya*, at the top, who oversees all operations. The Terapanthis, while being strict in their practice, have been at the forefront in spreading Jainism outside of India and in spreading basic Jain principles among non-Jains, both within India and beyond.

Jain Practices

Because they emphasize the ability of individuals to purify themselves and to perfect their own characters, Jains do not stress that devotional acts—directed toward gods or deceased leaders—bring help. Nonetheless, the practice of puja—offered to both the tirthankaras and to deities—has been adopted by most Jains. (Exceptions are the Sthanakavasis and Terapanthis.) There is a general feeling that the devotional acts have a good effect on one’s state of karma and that they focus the mind on saintly behavior. Jain temples, therefore, contain statues of the tirthankaras, especially Rishaba (the first tirthankara), Nemi (the twenty-second), Parshva, and Mahavira. The temple statues often look the same. In Digambara temples, the statues are unclothed and simple; in Shvetambara temples, they may be clothed and more ornate. Puja is performed before statues regularly, both by Jains and (in some places) by brahmin Hindus employed for the task. Puja ordinarily involves the offering of food, incense, the flames of oil lamps, and flowers, and sometimes the statues are bathed and devotees circumambulate (walk around) the statues. On special occasions in some areas, large outdoor statues are bathed in milk and other liquids. Many Jains also maintain home altars where they perform puja.

Monks and nuns regularly practice fasting, particularly at the times of full and new moons. Laypeople join the monks in fasting on the last days of the Jain year in late summer, before the celebration of the New Year begins (in August or September). This period of fasting (*pariyusana*) lasts fifteen days for the Digambaras and eight days for the Shvetambaras. The religious year ends with a confession of wrongdoing and a plea for pardon from anyone the devotee might have offended.

Pilgrimage is an important part of Jain spirituality, and the village near Patna, where Mahavira died, is a great pilgrimage center. Jains also visit the great temple complexes and attend the bathing of large statues. In the spring Jains celebrate the birthday of Mahavira, and in the fall they recall his experience of liberation.

Jain Scriptures

Jains speak of ancient scriptures, the Purvas, that exist no longer in their entirety but only as limited quotations in later scripture. Disagreement exists among the sects over what is to be accepted as canonical (authoritative). The literature preserved by the Shvetambara sect consists of forty-five works, divided into the canonical scriptures and later noncanonical works. At the heart of the canonical material are the eleven Angas (“limbs”). (A twelfth is said to have existed at one time.) Jainism holds the Angas to be the teachings of Mahavira, although they were not given final form until two centuries after his death. There are also twelve Upangas (“lesser limbs”), a collection of laws, rituals (particularly associated with assistance in dying), and other miscellaneous texts. Later noncanonical works include biographies of holy persons, commentaries on canonical works, and books of philosophy and science.³ The Digambara sect does not fully accept the authenticity of the Angas, maintaining that the words of Mahavira were remembered and transmitted imperfectly after the first division of the Jains had taken place. The Sthanakavasis do not recognize any literature as scripture.



The ceiling of Adinath Temple in Rajasthan, India, reveals the intricacy of Jain temple design.

© Photosindia/Corbis

Jain Art and Architecture

The most striking examples of Jain art are the statues of Mahavira and other tirthankaras. Although the seated statues resemble Buddhist sculpture, other sculptural forms contrast greatly with their Buddhist counterparts. Buddha figures are often gentle looking, with a preternatural sweetness in the faces; Jain figures, however, tend to be bold, powerful, and imposing. This is particularly true of statues of tirthankaras shown naked and standing: their nakedness somehow adds to their strength, and the standing figures are often presented with their legs and arms surrounded by vines, their immobility suggesting persistence and strength of character. The tirthankara seems to dare the viewer to be equally strong.

Jain temple architecture does not echo the simplicity of the sculpture. Some Jain temples show as much love for richness and decoration as some Hindu temples do. For example, the Jain temples on Mount Abu, in western India, are famous for their intricately carved marble ceilings. Sometimes, as in Kolkata (Calcutta), the temples also feature exuberant elements borrowed from European architecture, such as Corinthian columns and stained glass.

Sikhism

Background

Sikhism grew up in an area called the Punjab, which today is part of northwestern India and eastern Pakistan. Although the region has a long history of religious conflict between Hindus and Muslims, it is also an area in which significant attempts have been made to bridge division and misunderstanding. It is not surprising, then, that Sikhism, nurtured in the midst of conflict and resolution, exhibits elements reminiscent of both groups.

It is hard to imagine two religions more divergent than Hinduism and Islam. Hinduism recognizes many gods, whereas Islam recognizes only one; Hinduism cherishes religious images, whereas Islam prohibits them; and Hinduism promotes vegetarianism, but Islam, although it has dietary restrictions, allows the killing and eating of many animals, including cows.

Both religions, though, share an appreciation for religious devotion and value the attainment of mystical consciousness. In Hinduism, these traditions have been cultivated by the devotees of bhakti yoga, and in Islam they have been cultivated by Sufis (see Chapter 10). (Some scholars maintain that Sufism in fact derived much early inspiration from Hinduism.) Both religions also recognize the important role of a spiritual master—a *guru* or a *shaykh*. And while Islam is known for its rejection of images, some Hindus have also spoken against an exaggerated love of images.

Before Sikhism began, there were already people, called *sants*, who practiced a spirituality that drew from both religions and that sought to

overcome religious divisions. The greatest exponent of the sant tradition was the mystic Kabir (1440–1518), whose poetry has had enormous influence in India. It is from this interest in a mystical spirituality beyond the restrictions of any one religion that Sikhism emerged, and it was in the Punjab, where two often-opposing religions collided, that the founder of a new religion was born.

Nanak and the Origins of Sikhism

The founder of Sikhism, Nanak, was born in 1469 in what is today Pakistan. He grew up in a Hindu family, married, had two children, and held several jobs—first as a herder and then as a clerical assistant to a sultan. Because Nanak's life as a householder was accompanied by a strong religious interest, he and a Muslim friend named Mardana created a devotional association and met in the evenings to sing hymns and to discuss religious ideas.

One day Nanak had an experience so powerful that he saw it as a revelation. After bathing and performing religious ablutions in a nearby river, Nanak went into the adjacent forest, where he remained for three days. During that time he felt himself taken into the divine presence. He would later say that he had experienced God directly. This shattering experience revealed to him that there is but one God, beyond all human names and conceptions.

Nanak referred to the fundamental divine reality as the True Name—signifying that all names and terms that are applied to God are limited because the divine is beyond all human conception. Nanak now understood that Hindus and Muslims worshiped the same God and that a distinction between the two religions was mistaken. Nanak became famous for insisting that, when the True Name of God is experienced rather than just talked about, there is no "Hindu" and there is no "Muslim."

Nanak's revelation is similar to stories of the life-changing prophetic calls of Isaiah, Zarathustra, and Muhammad (as we will see in later chapters). His revelatory experience resolved his earlier doubts and was the great turning point of his life. Having decided to spread his new understanding, Nanak left his family and home, accompanied by his friend Mardana. As homeless wanderers, they visited holy sites throughout northern India. Wherever they went, Nanak preached and sought disciples, which is the meaning of the word Sikh (disciple). As a part of his preaching, Nanak sang devotional songs while Mardana, who was from a social class of musicians, played musical accompaniment.

Particularly startling was Nanak's style of clothing, which deliberately blended Hindu and Muslim elements. He wore the Hindu *dhoti* (a cloth drawn up between the legs to form pants), along with an orange Muslim coat and Muslim cap. He adorned his forehead with Hindu religious markings. The combination of elements was an important prophetic statement, predictably causing consternation among both Hindus and Muslims.

Nanak and Mardana continued their devotional teaching together until Mardana's death in his late 60s. Not long after, when Nanak sensed his own end approaching, he passed on his authority and work to a chosen disciple. He died in 1539 at age 70. Nanak is commonly called Guru Nanak and is recognized as the first of a line of ten Sikh gurus ("spiritual teachers").

The Worldview and Teachings of Nanak

Just as Nanak's clothing combined elements of Hinduism and Islam, so too did his worldview, at least on the surface. Earlier commentators spoke of Sikhism merely as a combination of Hindu and Muslim elements, yet Sikhs themselves—and more recent scholars—see Sikhism as an entirely unique religion. They speak of Nanak as having rejected both Islam and Hinduism, and they hold that Sikhism comes from a totally new revelation.

Nanak accepted—as does Hinduism—a belief in reincarnation and karma. His view of the human being was similar to that of the Sankhya school of philosophy, which views the human being as a composite of body and spirit. Because the body and physical world by nature bind and limit the spirit, the spirit must overcome physicality as it seeks freedom and absorption in the divine. This process may take many lifetimes to accomplish.

In spite of Nanak's acceptance of reincarnation and karma, there were other elements of Hinduism that he rejected. From a very early age, for example, he resisted Hindu love of ritual, criticizing it for taking human attention away from God. Similarly, he disdained Hindu polytheism, particularly Hindu devotion to images of various gods and goddesses. It is possible that Nanak's views in this regard were influenced by Islam.

According to Nanak's view of God, although God is ultimately beyond personhood, God does have personal qualities, such as knowledge, love, a sense of justice, and compassion. Because of these qualities, God can be approached personally by the individual. In Nanak's view, God is the primary guru. Although Nanak saw himself as God's mouthpiece, he preached that God dwells within each individual and can be contacted within the human heart.

Despite his emphasis on finding the divine within the individual, Nanak believed that true religion has a strong social responsibility. He criticized both Islam and Hinduism for their deficiencies in helping the poor and the oppressed. In response to his convictions, Nanak organized religious groups, called *sangats*, which were to offer both worship to God and assistance to fellow human beings.

The Development of Sikhism

Sikhism has gone through several stages of development. In its earliest stage, Sikhism was not defined as a distinct religion. It was simply a religious movement that sought to coexist peacefully with other religions. In the next stage, Sikhism was forced to adopt a militant, self-protective stance toward the world, and it took on some of the elements of a more formalized religion—a sacred book, a sacred city, and clearly defined religious practices. After that period of self-definition and consolidation, Sikhism, in its third and final stage, was able to move beyond its land of origin and to make converts elsewhere.

The earliest stage was that of the first four gurus—Nanak, Angad, Amar Das, and Ram Das. During this period, hymns were written, numerous communities were organized, and a village headquarters was created at Amritsar, in northern India.

The next stage—of consolidation and religious definition—began with Guru Arjan (1563–1606), a son of Ram Das. In his role as fifth guru, Arjan built the Golden Temple and its surrounding pond at Amritsar. Collecting about three thousand hymns—written by him and earlier gurus and saints—Arjan created the sacred book of the Sikhs, the *Adi Granth* (“original collection”). Because he resolutely resisted attempts by the Muslim emperor Jahangir to make him adopt Islamic practice, Arjan died of torture.

Arjan's son, Har Gobind, steered Sikhism in a more self-defensive direction. In response to his father's persecution, Har Gobind enlisted a bodyguard and an army to protect him and his followers. He adopted the practice of wearing a sword, thus abandoning the Hindu ideal of *ahimsa*. The growing militancy of evolving Sikhism was successful in averting persecution during the tenure of the next gurus, Har Rai and Harkishan.

The ninth guru, Tegh Bahadur, however, was imprisoned and decapitated by the Muslim emperor Aurangzeb, who saw Sikhism as a serious threat to his control. In response, the tenth guru, Gobind Rai (1666–1708) idealized the sword. Because of his military power, Gobind Rai came to be known as Gobind Singh (“Gobind the lion”). He inaugurated a special military order for men, called the *Khalsa*, and devised a ceremony of initiation, called the baptism of the sword, which involved sprinkling initiates with water that had been stirred with a sword. The *Khalsa* was open to all castes, for Gobind Singh had ended all caste distinctions among Sikhs. Every male within the *Khalsa* took the name *Singh* (“lion”).

Over time, Gobind Singh suffered the deaths of his four sons and was left without a successor. Possibly foreseeing his own assassination, he declared that the *Adi Granth* was to be considered both his successor and the final, permanent Guru. The sacred book, both in Amritsar and in Sikh temples (*gurdwaras*), is therefore treated with the same reverence that would be shown a living guru. As such, it is called *Guru Granth Sahib*. At the death of Gobind Singh, Sikhism was now clearly defined as a religion, with the means to spread beyond its place of origin.



Sikh pilgrims receive and share a meal at the temple of Punja Sahib in Hasanabdal, a town near Pakistan's capital, Islamabad. Sikhs from all over the world visit this shrine every year to mark the three-day festival of Baisakhi.

© Reuters/Corbis

Deeper Insights: The “Five K’S” of the Sikh Khalsa

In India and in big cities of the West, Sikhs today are often associated with turbans. In fact, their characteristic dress reflects not one but five practices. These practices are not observed by all Sikhs, however, but only by those who have entered the *Khalsa*, the special Sikh military order. Members of the *Khalsa* originally adopted the five practices to promote strength and self-identity. Because the names of the practices each begin with the letter *k*, they are called the Five K’s:

- *Kesh*: uncut hair and beard—in association with the lion and its power; the hair on the head is usually worn in a topknot and covered with a turban or cloth.
- *Khanga*: hair comb—to hold the long hair in place.
- *Kach*: special underwear—to indicate alertness and readiness to fight.
- *Kirpan*: sword—for defense.
- *Kara*: bracelet of steel—to symbolize strength.

In addition, members of the *Khalsa* are required to avoid all intoxicants. For a long time, the *Khalsa* was open only to men, but eventually women were also admitted.

Sikh Scriptures

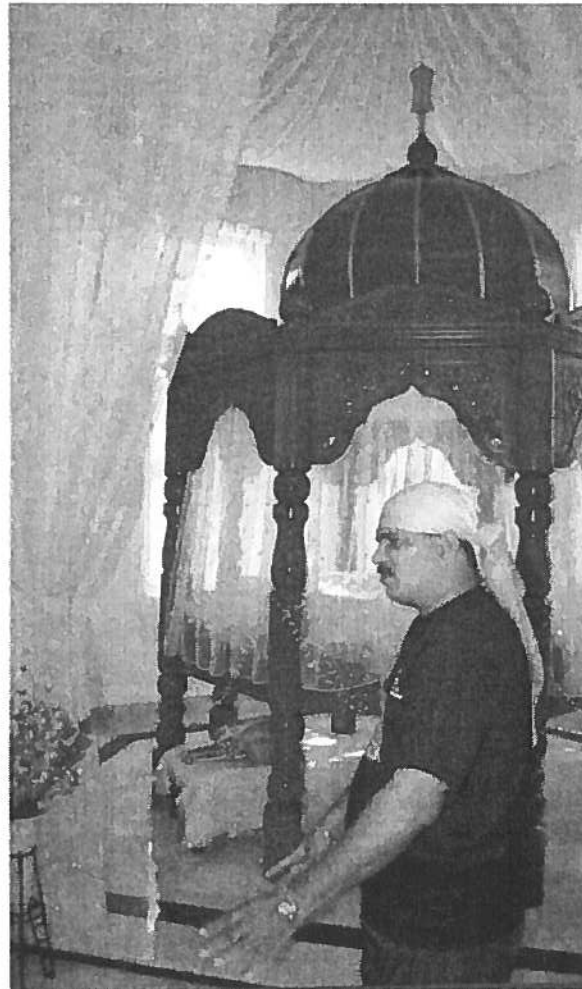
The primary book of Sikh scripture, the *Adi Granth*, is divided into three parts. The first and most important part is the *Japji*, a moderately long poem by Guru Nanak that summarizes the religion. It speaks of the indescribability of God and the joy of union with him. Its opening words declare, “There is only one God whose name is true, the Creator, devoid of fear and enmity, immortal, unborn, self-existent.”⁴ The second part consists of thirty-nine *rags* (“tunes”) by Guru Nanak and later gurus. The third part is a collection of varied works, including poems and hymns from

Hindu, Muslim, and Sikh gurus and saints.

Because the Adi Granth is believed to contain the living spirit of Nanak and his successors, it is treated with utmost reverence and given personal honors as the embodiment of the gurus. At the Golden Temple in Amritsar, it is brought out in the early morning by a gloved attendant, set on a cushion under a canopy, read from aloud by professional readers, fanned throughout the day, and then "put to bed" at night. In gurdwaras, copies of the Adi Granth are enshrined and read. It is consulted for solutions to problems by opening it freely and reading from the top of the left-hand page. (Even children are named by this method, being given names corresponding to the first letter read at the top of the left-hand page when the Adi Granth is opened randomly.) Sikh homes may have a room to enshrine the Adi Granth, and devout Sikhs daily read or recite its passages from memory.

An example of the poetic nature of the Adi Granth is the following canticle by Nanak in praise of God:

Wonderful Your word, wonderful Your knowledge;
 Wonderful Your creatures, wonderful their species;
 Wonderful their forms, wonderful their colors;
 Wonderful the animals which wander naked;
 Wonderful Your wind; wonderful Your water;
 Wonderful Your fire which sports wondrously;
 Wonderful the earth...;
 Wonderful the desert, wonderful the road;
 Wonderful Your nearness, wonderful Your remoteness;
 Wonderful to behold You present.⁵



A temple assistant explains the significance of the repository that houses the Adi Granth and other books sacred to Sikhs.

© Thomas Hilgers

Sikhism and the Modern World

Because of their military training, Sikhs were employed by the British as soldiers. After the British left the Indian subcontinent in 1947, however, the Sikhs experienced painful dislocation. More than two million left Pakistan to avoid conflict with the Muslim majority, and most settled in

northwestern India, where today some Sikhs hope to create an independent state. Antagonism has flared up between the Sikhs and the Indian government over this matter, and although Sikh separatists have taken over the Golden Temple at Amritsar, Indian government forces have repeatedly taken it back. In retaliation for her support of Indian government troops during the first of these takeovers, Prime Minister Indira Gandhi was assassinated in 1984 by Sikhs who were among her bodyguards.

Sikhs have begun to settle widely outside India, particularly in countries open to Indian immigration, such as England and former British territories. (There is a considerable community, for example, in Vancouver, British Columbia.) They have established gurdwaras, which serve as daily prayer centers as well as charitable kitchens and social meeting places. Although Sikhs do not have a tradition of making converts, their simple and self-reliant lifestyle has attracted many new members. Their success and continued growth is likely.



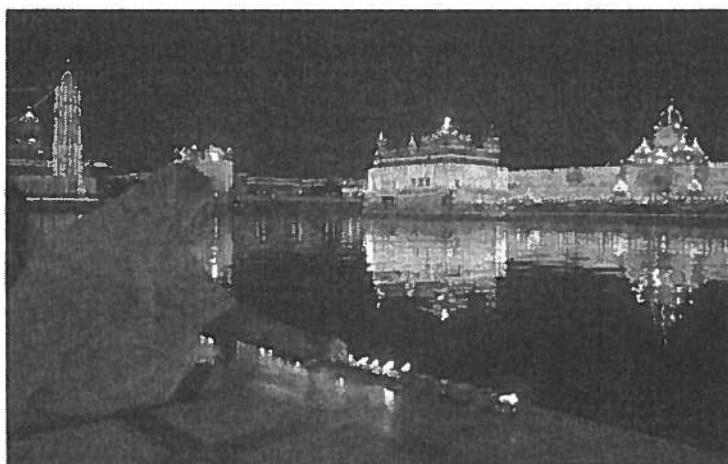
Devotees and priests pay their respects to their holy book, Guru Granth Sahib, inside the Sikh shrine of the Golden Temple. They are celebrating the birthday of Guru Nanak, the founder of the Sikh faith.

© Munish Sharma/Reuters/Corbis

Personal Experience: A Visit to the Golden Temple

The Golden Temple of Amritsar sits in the midst of a busy Indian city on an island in an artificial lake. On the day that I visited, however, the water of the lake had been drained, and about thirty workers were moving about and chatting down below as they cleaned and made repairs. While I surveyed the scene, I overheard what sounded like American English being spoken nearby. A man with black hair and a short black beard, his blond wife, and his young daughter were taking photos and discussing the restoration work. I offered to photograph them against the backdrop of the Golden Temple, and then we fell into conversation. The man introduced himself and his family. Mr. Singh and his wife Marianne were not American, he said, but Canadian.

"I was born in Vancouver just after my parents immigrated to Canada from India. We've come here to visit my grandparents and to see the Golden Temple," he explained. "And I'm from Alberta, originally," added Mrs. Singh. "I'm not a Sikh—at least not yet. I was raised Catholic. My parents immigrated to Canada from Poland and have a farm north of Calgary. My husband and I met in college at the University of British Columbia." She turned to the girl, "This is our daughter, June." After shaking hands, we went across the walkway together into the Golden Temple.



The Golden Temple in Amritsar is serene at dawn.

© AP Photo/Prabhjot Gill

The interior was hot and muggy, but a feeling of devotion overcame my discomfort. A venerable-looking man with a long white beard was reading from the Adi Granth while an attendant waved a feather fan overhead. People moved slowly in line, but the size of the crowd kept us from staying inside for very long. Outside, we decided to have lunch together. We found a restaurant not far away where we ate and talked.

Mr. Singh pointed to his short hair and neatly clipped beard. "As you can see, I do not practice all the traditions of my religion. I am proud of my religion, though, and particularly proud of the emphasis it puts on strength and endurance."

Mrs. Singh nodded. "Being in a mixed marriage, we've certainly needed strength at times, and we've found elements in both our religions that help us. I think, though, that we are typical of many Canadian couples, and our mixed marriage has been a rich experience for both of us."

"For our parents, too," Mr. Singh added, and both laughed and shook their heads knowingly. "My name means 'lion,'" he continued. "I want to use my strength to be a strong individual, not just a representative of a single religious path. Where I live, there's a large Sikh community, and it would be easy to deal exclusively with people of my own religion and ethnic background. But I want to be more universal, while keeping my religion in my heart."

As we got up to leave and were saying our good-byes, Mr. Singh lifted his arm. "Though I cut my hair and beard, I always wear this." He pulled back the cuff of his long-sleeved shirt and proudly showed me his kara—his steel Sikh bracelet.

Reading: A Prayer for Peace*

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This modern prayer is by Satish Kumar, a Jain activist and editor of the magazine Resurgence. Known for his autobiography, called No Destination, his primary goals have been international peace and environmental awareness. The prayer that follows is adapted from the Upanishads and is similar to prayers in several religions, including Hinduism and Christianity. It is framed in such a way that people of any religious tradition of belief may say it.

Lead me from death to life, from falsehood to truth;
lead me from despair to hope, from fear to trust;
lead me from hate to love, from war to peace. Let peace fill our heart, our world, our universe.⁶

Test Yourself

- In Jainism, the greatest of all _____ was Nataputta Vardhamana, who is usually referred to by the honorary title Mahavira.
 - buddhas
 - mahatmas
 - tirthankaras
 - priests
- As a result of his liberating experience, following twelve years of meditation, wandering, and mortification, Mahavira is called a _____. It is the title from which Jainism takes its name.
 - jiva
 - atheism
 - singh
 - Trimurti
- The Jain goal is to reach a state of _____.
 - total freedom
 - reincarnation
 - physical perfection
 - intellectual greatness
- One of the five ethical recommendations of Jainism is _____.
 - ahimsa
 - dukkha
 - nakedness
 - yoga
- Although Buddhism followed a deliberate path of moderation, Jainism gloried in _____.
 - the Vedic religion
 - austerity
 - the middle way

- d. the priestly class
6. The founder of Sikhism, Guru _____, is recognized as the first in a line of ten Sikh gurus ("spiritual teachers").
 - a. Gautama
 - b. Bhakti
 - c. Singh
 - d. Nanak
 7. Sikhism was mostly influenced by Hinduism and _____.
 - a. Islam
 - b. Jainism
 - c. Buddhism
 - d. Daoism
 8. Nanak accepted, as does Hinduism, a belief in reincarnation and _____.
 - a. polytheism
 - b. atheism
 - c. karma
 - d. Trimurti
 9. Sikhs wear a bracelet of steel, called _____, which symbolizes strength.
 - a. kesh
 - b. kach
 - c. kirpan
 - d. kara
 10. The primary book of Sikh scripture is the _____, which is believed to contain the living spirit of the ten gurus.
 - a. Qur'an
 - b. Vedas
 - c. Adi Granth
 - d. Purvas
 11. Consider the following statement: Sallekhana ("holy death") violates the Jain principle of ahimsa because it is an act of violence against oneself. Using examples from the chapter, what points might a follower of Jainism make to argue against this statement?
 12. Discuss the similarities and differences between Jainism and Sikhism. What do you think is the most important similarity? What is the most important difference? Use specifics to support your answers.

Resources

Books

- Grewal, J. S. *The Sikhs of the Punjab*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008. Possibly the most comprehensive and informative single-volume survey of Sikh history and religion currently available.
- Long, Jeffery. *Jainism: An Introduction*. London and New York: I. B. Tauris, 2009. A philosophical treatment of the teachings of Jainism.
- MacAuliffe, Max Arthur. *The Sikh Religion*. Charleston: Forgotten Books, 2008. The reprint of a classic by an early specialist.
- Parikh, Vastupal. *Jainism and the New Spirituality*. Toronto: Peace Publications, 2002. An exploration of Jainism and its connection to peace movements and ecology.
- Rankin, Aidan. *The Jain Path: Ancient Wisdom for the West*. Delhi: Saujanya Books, 2007. A book that uses traditional Jain belief and philosophy to call for a new global movement of compassion and interdependence.
- Singh, Khushwant. *Sikhs Unlimited*. New Delhi: Rupa, 2008. Meetings with illustrious Sikhs around the world.
- Tobias, Michael. *Life Force: The World of Jainism*. Fremont, CA: Jain Publishing, 2000. An introduction to Jainism, as experienced by a Western practitioner interested in ecology.

Film/TV

- Around the World in 80 Faiths*. (BBC.) An eight-part series that documents eighty sacred rituals across six continents in the space of a single year. Episode six includes a segment on a Sikh ritual honoring the three-hundredth anniversary of the guru Gobind Singh and another segment on Jain ritual in southern India.
- Gandhi*. (Director Richard Attenborough; Columbia Tristar.) The life of Mahatma Gandhi, who was strongly influenced by Jainism.
- Sikhs in America*. (Sikh Art and Film Foundation.) An

Emmy Award–winning documentary profiling the Sikh community in the United States.

Music/Audio

Dya Singh. *Dukh Bhanjan Tera Naam*. Noble Park, Australia: Advertisingh, 2011. Contemporary versions of Sikh prayers.

Ho Shankheswarwasi. (RajAudio Music.) A compilation of ten Jain devotional chants.

Mehsopuria. *Faith*. London: Primary Records, 2008. Modern songs based on Sikh prayer and Sikh belief.

Religious Music of Asia. (Smithsonian Folkways.) A recording of Asian religious music, including a Jain puja and a Sikh Adi Granth recitation.

SikhNet Gurbani Collection—Volume 1. (SikhNet.com.) A collection of Sikh devotional recordings from around the world.

Internet

All About Sikhs: <http://allaboutsikhs.com/>. A comprehensive resource portal for Sikhism, including an encyclopedia, list of books, and general information on Sikh gurus, history, way of life, temples, and scriptures.

Jainism: <http://www.cs.colostate.edu/~malaiya/~jainlinks.html>. A resource that contains links organized by categories, such as "Songs and Prayers," "Vegetarianism and Ahimsa," "Jain Texts," "Jain Pilgrimage," "Jain Images," and "Regional Organizations."

Jainworld: <http://www.jainworld.com/>. Information on Jain philosophy, societies, education, literature, and temples.

Key Terms

Adi Granth (ah'-dee grahnt)

"Original collection"; the primary scripture of the Sikhs.

ajiva (uh-jee'-va)

Matter without soul or life.

Digambara (di-gam'-ba-ra)

"Clothed in sky"; a member of the Jain sect in which monks ideally do not wear clothing.

gurdwara (gur-dwah'-rah)

A Sikh temple.

hylozoism

The belief that all physical matter has life and feeling.

Japji (jahp'-jee)

A poem by Guru Nanak that begins the Adi Granth; the poem is recited daily by pious Sikhs. **jina (jee'-nah)**: "Conquerer"; the Jain term for a perfected person who will not be reborn.

jiva (jee'-vah)

Spirit, soul, which enlivens matter.

puja (poo'-jah)

Ritual in honor of a tirthankara or deity.

sallekhana (sahl-lek-hah'-nuh)

"Holy death"; death by self-starvation, valued in Jainism as a noble end to a long life of virtue and detachment.

Shvetambara (shvet-ahm'-bah-rah)

"Clothed in white"; a member of the Jain sect in which monks and nuns wear white clothing.

Sikh (seek)

"Disciple"; a follower of the Sikh religion.

Sthanakavasi (stun-uk-uh-vuh'-see)

"Building person"; a member of a Jain sect that rejects the use of statues and temples.

Terapanthi (teh-ra-pahn'-tee)

"Thirteen"; a member of the newest Jain sect.

tirthankara (tahr-tahn'-kah-ruh)

"Crossing maker"; in Jainism, one of the twenty-four ideal human beings of the past, Mahavira being the most recent.

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ISBN: 9780078038273 Author: Michael Molloy

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