Beliefs, Values and Practices: Hinduism
Hinduism

What is Hinduism?

Hinduism is one of the world’s oldest religions, originating more than 3,000 years ago. Hinduism is a significant religion within Scotland with over 16,000 identifying themselves as Hindu in the last census in 2011.

Hinduism has a great breadth of beliefs and rituals and philosophies. Hindus believe in an ultimate reality or great power called Brahman, although Hindus worship the personal attributes of Brahman through different deities such as Vishnu (the Creator) or Lakshmi (the Goddess of Love and Beauty). By gaining merit and aiming for a good rebirth, Hindus are aiming for liberation and salvation. In order to do this, Hindus follow the Dharma or universal law.

Within this section you will find information about how prominent Hindus put their beliefs and values into practice.

What is it like to be a Hindu?

This video shows one young Hindu talking about what it means to her to be a Hindu in Scotland today.

Video

Watch: Testimony – [Hinduism on YouTube](https://youtu.be/0-Kp45qcMw4) - [Hinduism on GlowTV](https://www.glowtv.net/collection/119086) (Glow login required)

Reflecting on Hinduism

- What questions might you ask this young Hindu?
- How has this young person’s life been shaped by her beliefs?
- What beliefs and values shape your life?
- Is it important to put your beliefs and values into action?
- How might you/do you put your beliefs and values into action?
- In what ways are your beliefs and values similar to/different from those of others?
- Why is it important to understand the diversity of beliefs and values in modern Scotland?
- What skills do you think are important when exploring beliefs and values?
- Why might understanding your beliefs and values and those of others be an important skill in the workplace?
Prominent figures in Hinduism: Arun Gandhi

Introduction

Arun Gandhi is a social rights campaigner who has followed in the footsteps of his grandfather Mahatma Gandhi by using peaceful, non-violent methods to raise awareness of inequalities around the world.

Although he regards himself as a Hindu, he shares the belief of his grandfather who said:

‘Religion is like climbing a mountain. Ultimately, we are all going to the same peak, so why should it matter which side we are going up?’

Mohandas Karamchand (Mahatma) Gandhi

Background

Arun Ghandi was born in Durban, South Africa, in 1934. Early in his life, he experienced prejudice from white South Africans for being ‘too black’ and from black South Africans for being ‘too white’.

The only son of Sushila and Manilal Gandhi, one of the biggest influences on his life was his grandfather Mohandas Karamchand (Mahatma) Gandhi, who promoted the philosophy of Sarvodaya (welfare for all people).

‘When I lived with grandfather between the ages of 12 and 14, he taught me to ask myself every day, in fact at every moment, if what I was contemplating to do would help or hinder other human beings. If the honest answer was that it would harm others, then I was committing an act of violence.’

Arun Gandhi

Work

Arun Gandhi has worked as a journalist, author and international speaker on the theme of social change. With his wife Sunanda Ambegaonkar, he spent over 30 years working to combat poverty in India.

He continues to campaign, teach and write in an effort to create a better world and better life conditions for all people in a peaceful, non-violent way.
Arun’s thoughts on religion

‘Religion has been reduced to mere rituals. We think that just practicing particular ceremonies, saying certain prayers or incantations, is all it takes to bring us blessings in life. But this is not true. They are meaningless words unless people behave in ways that are consistent with their espoused beliefs.’

Arun Gandhi

Like his grandfather, Arun Gandhi can be considered a Hindu and a universalist. That is someone who believes that all religions are of value and that respect for the beliefs of others is the way to a more peaceful existence based on the principles of love, compassion, understanding and respect.

For him, worship is practised either quietly at home or in public where anyone of any faith can join in. Salvation lies in bringing decency and humanity to those who need help - an example which he argues was set by key figures in several world religions including Siddartha Guatama, Krishna, Jesus and Muhammad.

Arun’s thoughts on non-violence

Arun Gandhi is an advocate of ‘nonviolence’, a term which he argues is quite different from non-violence. The former is based on positive emotions such as love and compassion, while the latter is rooted in negative emotions such as anger and hurt.

He believes that forms of ‘passive violence’, such as ignoring, hurting or insulting others, can often result in more aggressive responses, leading to a perpetual cycle of violence. As such, it is just as important to avoid passive violence as it is to avoid acts of physical violence.

‘It is only when we learn to respect people as human beings that we will be able to truly practise nonviolence. We cannot and should not be selective in whom we respect, it has to be unconditional and all-pervasive.’

Arun Gandhi

Arun’s thoughts on forgiveness

‘My fear is that punishment seldom brings about reformation of a character, it only shames the person deeper into the hole. How many times have I heard prisoners tell me: ‘We are willing to atone for our sins but is society willing to forgive us?’

Arun Gandhi

Forgiveness is at the heart of Arun Gandhi’s beliefs. In the face of injustice or wrongdoing, he argues that a 'nonviolent' response will bring healing and resolution. By attempting to live in a way where acts of passive violence are reduced, humanity might be able to end the cycle of violence.

‘We commit passive violence every day, consciously and unconsciously, and that causes anger in the victim who resorts to physical violence either to get justice or to seek revenge. Therefore, it can be said that passive violence is the fuel that ignites physical violence. If we wish to put out the fire of physical violence, we need to cut off the fuel supply. Unless we change our habits, the habits of the world will not change’.

Arun Gandhi
An interview with Arun

1. What/who would you consider to be the greatest influences on your life and your beliefs/philosophy?

Primary influences came from my parents who practiced 'nonviolence' at home and outside in their public life and, of course, my grandfather who laid the foundation of my path to 'nonviolence'. But I keep an open mind and am often influenced by little children as well as adults, important and ordinary.

2. As an advocate of 'nonviolence', you have often argued that when faced with violence one should try to respond positively, choosing the action that will bring healing or cause least hurt. Can you describe a time or times where this has been a challenge for you and how your beliefs in 'nonviolence' helped you?

While I lived in India I met a white man who appeared to be troubled. When I offered help and he introduced himself, I realised he was a member of the South African parliament and a member of the Nationalist Party that introduced apartheid. I held him responsible for all the humiliation I had suffered in South Africa and, subsequently, for making it impossible for me to join my widowed mother and two sisters there simply because I married a woman from India.

My first reaction was to insult him as I was insulted and show him what it means to dehumanise people. But I remembered the lessons I learned from my parents and grandparents and realised they would not forgive me if I insulted him. So, I shook hands, introduced myself and explained that I was a victim of apartheid. I was friendly and not insulting.

He needed the help of someone to show him and his wife around the city of Mumbai. For a week my wife and I played good hosts. During this period, we talked about apartheid. At the end of the visit, both Mr and Mrs Basson embraced us and wept tears of remorse. Mr Basson said: 'In these few days you have opened our eyes to the evils of apartheid. I promise you that we will go back and fight apartheid.'

I was still a sceptic and not ready to believe him but I did follow his political career for the next few years and realised that he was a changed man. He spoke so vehemently against apartheid that he lost his election and was dismissed from the party but remained steadfast against apartheid. That is the power of 'nonviolence' - to convert, not to confront.

3. Can you tell us about a time when it has been difficult for you to forgive? How did you resolve this?

I was very angry with the assassins who killed my grandfather and could not forgive them although my parents tried to teach me that forgiving is what my grandfather would have wanted.

It was only in the 1960s when one of the assassins, the brother of the main assassin, Nathuram Godse, was released from prison after serving his sentence that I mustered courage to go to his home and meet him. I did not go with rancour nor to confront him. I went with an open heart and mind to try and understand what prompted them to do what they did.

He received my family and me with utmost respect and entertained us to tea. We talked civilly and agreed to meet again. After three meetings when I realised that there was nothing I could say would make him realise his mistake, I told him politely that there was no point in our
discussions. That we were never going to agree. However, I said: 'I have forgiven you. The consequence of your actions are for you to deal with. I refuse to destroy my life with anger and hate for what you did.'

I believe this is the essence of 'nonviolence'. We must always try to convert people through respect and love. When you cannot you should walk away satisfied that if nothing else you have succeeded in planting seeds in the aggressor’s mind and hopefully it will make him or her think and change later.

4. Can you tell us about how your grandfather was able to deal so positively with those who sought to oppress him and his people?

Grandfather realised that 'nonviolence' is not passive, it is very active. You do not walk away from a situation but you try to find an equitable solution. You do not try to eliminate your opponent but try to change the person. Although people believe that 'nonviolence' is a negative philosophy, he believed it is positive. To practice nonviolence one has to purge oneself of all the hate, prejudice, anger, frustration and other detrimental feelings and attitudes and replace them with love, respect, understanding, acceptance, and appreciation.

5. Can you describe for us the difference between passive and active violence and how one can attempt to avoid a cycle of violence?

Passive violence is the kind of violence we commit without using physical force, such as discrimination, hate, prejudice, name calling, teasing, over-consumption of resources, selfishness, exploitation etc. Active violence is the kind where physical force is used like murders, rapes, wars, killings, beatings, punching, slapping etc.

When each one of us does honest and deep introspection we will find that we all commit a lot more passive violence even if we do not indulge in physical violence. If we recognise our weaknesses we can do something to change them to strengths. But if we live in denial then we will never change and we will continue to commit passive violence.

It is important to remember that passive violence is the fuel that ignites physical violence. Therefore, since the fuel comes from each one of us, we must become the change we wish to see in the world.

6. How have your Hindu beliefs influenced your philosophy and your life?

The essence of Hinduism is unity and inclusiveness. The reason why Hindus are derided for believing in hundreds of thousands of Gods is because of a popular misconception. It is not that Hindus believe in so many Gods but they believe that since no one has seen what the true image of God is, how can we say our image is the right one and yours is wrong.

So, Hindus accept the images of everyone and allow people to worship whom they want, whichever way they want to and where they want. There is absolute freedom. This freedom does not exist in any other religion.

Because of this freedom there is, in theory, a respect for all other religions. Unfortunately, this respect does not manifest itself in daily practice because modern practitioners of Hinduism have become victims of the prejudices practiced by others.

7. Your grandfather said that 'a friendly study of all the scriptures is the sacred duty of every individual'. What are your views on the values and teachings of other religions?

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I believe, as grandfather did, that every religion has a part of the Truth. The only way we can come to understand the whole Truth or the true essence of any religion is to take the bits of Truth from all other religions and incorporate that in your own.

He believed, and I also do, that we must learn to respect all religions as we respect our own. We can respect faiths and beliefs only when we learn to respect people and the diversity that exists among them. Gandhi believed in secularism which does not mean rejecting one’s own religion but respecting all religions as being equal.

8. As a Hindu, you have said that one can only pursue truth, not possess it. This leads to acceptance of alternative images of God. How might you respond to the following challenges:

(a) The scriptures of Christianity, Judaism or Islam claim to reveal the exclusive truth of God.

A religion is as imperfect and fallible as man since it is man who has translated the scriptures and made us believe that it is the word of God. There is no reason (or proof) to believe that those who translated the scriptures had a direct hotline to God. The Western family of religions believe that the word of God comes through the Son of God. In each religion we believe that sometime or the other God descends upon the earth in human form to set us on the right course.

If this be so we have to ask ourselves the simple question: Why is it that we follow them in life, worship them in death but refuse to make their cause our cause? Why is it that we pray at our convenience by simply mouthing the words but never practice them? Why is the word of God enshrined in a book to be read and forgotten? Why do we believe that only those who believe as we do are right and all others are wrong?

For any philosophy to be vibrant it has to be living and I consider all the scriptures as philosophy. The moment we put the philosophy into a book it ceases to be vibrant and becomes a dogma. That is why we refer to books written thousands of years ago for answers to present day problems. These answers are interpreted by human beings because the scriptures are ambiguous. When we accept what was written thousands of years ago as Truth we have a closed mind, like a room that is shut and no fresh air is allowed to enter.

(b) That in accepting all images of God, we must accept even those which cause harm.

I think it is wrong to believe that God does wrong. It is man who does wrong in the name of God. When Christians justified racism and lynching of blacks in the United States it would be wrong to say that God sanctioned this although the Christians did try to justify this as sanctioned by religion. Similarly, because the Muslims today are waging a war and killing in the name of God does not mean the Prophet, peace be unto him, has been sanctioning war.

It is man who misrepresents religion and God. The fault lies in the imperfection of man and in the belief in a dogma.
Reflective questions

1. What questions would you like to ask Arun Gandhi?
2. What do you think of Arun Gandhi’s views about violence and non-violence?
3. Thoughts on religion
4. Reading Arun Gandhi’s Thoughts on religion and the section Questions for Arun, and with reference to any relevant wider reading, summarise Arun Gandhi’s beliefs about: (a) the existence of God; (b) human nature and the relationship between God and people.
5. How can Arun Gandhi’s religious beliefs be seen in what he says about life, ‘nonviolence’ and in some of the stories about his actions?
6. In considering Arun Gandhi’s religious beliefs, how do they match or differ with your own views of humanity and God?
7. Do you consider Arun Gandhi’s view to be a positive view of religion? Would the world be a different place if more people adopted such views?
8. Discuss any situations in Scotland today where religious views cause tension. How might Arun Gandhi encourage those involved to speak and act? How would you act if involved?
9. Summarise and discuss Arun Gandhi’s views on the potential for any one religion to hold an exclusive claim to truth. Do you agree with his thinking?
10. Is nonviolence more than ‘simply a counter to the anger, hurt and dehumanisation of violence’?
11. Discuss the difference between passive and active violence and how the phrase ‘be the change you want to see’ is relevant to these.
12. Can you think of any current situations locally, nationally or globally where the philosophy of ‘nonviolence’ could make a difference?
13. Have you encountered a situation where you feel taking a ‘nonviolent’ stance, in line with the teachings of Gandhi, may have produced a positive outcome?
14. How do Arun Gandhi’s views on forgiveness compare with those of another world religion?
15. How do Arun Gandhi’s views on forgiveness compare with your own views on forgiveness?
16. Can you discuss a situation locally, nationally or globally where forgiveness may provide a positive solution?
17. Is ‘unconditional’ forgiveness always possible?
18. Do you agree with Arun Gandhi that one should forgive but not forget? Does remembering the action risk a potential hindrance to forgiveness?

Activities to support learning

Activities

- What do you think Interfaith work is all about? What might its advantages and disadvantages be?
- Find out more about Hindu beliefs and values. How do you think the life of Arun Gandhi demonstrates these beliefs and values?
- In what ways are Hindu beliefs and values similar to/different from beliefs and values of other religions and belief groups?
- How has learning about Hindu beliefs and values influenced your own developing beliefs and values?