

What does freedom mean in the Sikh religion (13 – 16 years)

Key words and concepts

- **democracy:** government by the people.
- **human rights:** rights regarded as belonging to every person. They usually include freedom from unlawful imprisonment, torture and execution.
- **equality:** giving people fair treatment, without discrimination.
- **discrimination:** treating people more or less favourably than others because of their actual or perceived gender, ethnicity or religion.
- **social justice:** a society based on equality and human rights.
- **religion:** system of values and beliefs held with strong faith and feeling.
- **rights:** freedoms to which a person is entitled.
- **freedom of conscience (sometimes called freedom of thought):** the right to hold a viewpoint or thought that is different from that of others.
- **feminism:** the view that women's autonomy is limited in male-dominated culture, and a desire to overturn this.
- **Guru:** Teacher. In Sikhism, the title of Guru is reserved for the ten human Gurus and the Guru Granth Sahib (...a 'destroyer of ignorance').
- **miri:** worldly power or worldly riches.
- **piri:** spiritual realisation or spiritual riches.
- **miri-piri:** Based on the Oneness of God with creation; spiritual realisation (piri) and worldly power (miri) are not opposites and should be balanced. Personal freedom implies freedom from addictions and compulsions within us (spiritual riches), but also social, economic and political relationships based on mutual respect and friendliness (worldly riches) .
- **Ik Onkar:** *There is only One God.* The first phrase of the *Mool Mantar*. It is also used as a symbol to decorate Sikh objects.
- **Mool Mantar:** *Basic teaching; essential teaching.* The basic statement of belief at the beginning of the **Guru Granth Sahib**.
- **Waheguru:** *Wonderful Lord.* A Sikh name for God.

Learning activities

- Put pupils into groups so that those with greater literacy skills can help less able pupils.
- Provide each group with three prepared sheets of A3 paper. Each sheet has (a different) one of the following three sets of quotations as a heading.

Sheet 1

“Henceforth, such is the Will of God: No one shall coerce another; no one shall exploit another. Everyone, each individual, has the inalienable birthright to seek and pursue happiness and self-fulfilment. Love and persuasion is the only law of social coherence.” Guru Granth Sahib Ji, p. 74

Sheet 2

“Tegh Bahadur broke the mortal vessel of his body by striking it at the head of the Emperor of Delhi and retreated to his Original Abode [God]. Truly incomparable is this great deed done to assert and protect three basic human rights: the first, to secure for everyone freedom of worship; the second, to uphold the inviolable dignity of everyone’s private and personal point of contact with God and the right to observe dharma [what s/he thinks of as the basic principles of righteous existence]; the third, to uphold every good person’s right to pursue her/his own vision of happiness and self-fulfilment.” Dasam Granth, Book of the Tenth Master, p. 54.

Sheet 3

“Of woman are we conceived, of woman are we born. To woman are we betrothed and married. It is a woman who is a friend and partner for life. It is woman who keeps the race going. How may we think low of her of whom are born the greatest. From a woman a woman is born: none may exist without a woman. Guru Granth Sahib Ji, p. 73.

“Only they are truly married who have one spirit in two bodies.” Guru Granth Sahib Ji, p. 788.

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- Ask pupils to consider how each quotation might apply to *specific* situations in the world today, and to write their own questions and possible solutions underneath the headings, e.g., for Sheet 1, pupils might comment on how vulnerable people might be exploited by ‘loan sharks’ and suggest that there should be proper government / voluntary help for people in need, or for Sheet 2, they might ask, ‘What do Sikhs think should happen to someone who breaks any of the three basic human rights?’ and comment that there should be ‘love and persuasion’ rather than punishment, or for Sheet 3, they might wonder why women are still not treated equally in the world today and comment that sexist attitudes need to be challenged everywhere and at all times.

- When pupils have added a few comments and questions to each sheet, ask them to consider the following questions and to add more comments and questions to the A3 sheet they think most appropriate [continuing their thoughts on the other side of the paper if they run out of space]:
 - Why do people have different views about freedom of expression?
 - What might Sikhs say about the repression of views and ideas?
 - Why do people have different views about the best system of government?
 - What might Sikhs say about government according to the rules of a religion?
 - Why do people have different views about the equality of women?
 - What might Sikhs say about inequality in society?
- Choose quotes from 4 influential European thinkers on freedom and equality: John Locke, Voltaire, Jean-Jacques Rousseau and Mary Wollstonecraft. Either choose two per thinker yourself or give groups time to choose online, making connections with the Sikh passages studied.
- Record European thinkers' thoughts on the Sikh passage that seems most similar. Write brief notes on why these passages seem to be saying similar things. If differences occur, record these as well.
- Discuss what sort of ideal society both Sikh and Western ideas describe. Would students like to live in this society? Why do they think this has not been achieved yet?
- In order to complete the investigation in to the key question, 'What does freedom (miri- piri) mean in the Sikh religion?', ask pupils to work in their groups, to use the material on their sheets and in their investigations to produce a digital presentation (e.g. PowerPoint, video) of their findings. Advise them that, as part of their work they may need to supplement their research with more ideas and with carefully selected images.