

GCE A LEVEL

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# An Introduction to Sikhism : Theme 2: Religious concepts

Knowledge and understanding of  
religion and belief

2C Karma, rebirth and mukti AO2

## Theme 2: Religious concepts

### Knowledge and understanding of religion and belief

<b>A.</b>	<p><b>Exploring Sikh teachings concerning self, death, afterlife and meaning and purpose of life, with reference to:</b></p> <p><b>Philosophical understanding of the Sikh concept of God:</b></p> <p>God is the one, the only one and the one without a second; symbolism of Ik Onkar (Adi Granth 929,1035,1037); God as personal – Adi Granth 784, 1190; God as nirguna (without attributes) and saguna (with attributes); God as omnipotent and omniscient; God as creator and sustainer of life – Adi Granth 25, 684,700; God as immanent and transcendent.</p>
<b>B.</b>	<p><b>The soul:</b></p> <p>Nature of the soul - divine spark of Wahegurū, ethereal and non-material; union with Wahegurū. The aim of breaking cycle of rebirth; journey of the soul through many life forms to attain this aim; stages of development on the path of enlightenment including stage of Saram Khand, the realm of effort and realm of grace; monist and monotheistic understanding of the relationship between God and the soul.</p>
<b>C.</b>	<p><b>Karma, rebirth and mukti:</b></p> <p>Philosophical understanding of the path of liberation – replacement of ignorance by spiritual enlightenment affected by God’s Grace – it is the meaning and purpose of life; the role of karma and transmigration of the soul; union with God – Adi Granth 1127, 905, 275 as the meaning and purpose of Sikh life.</p>

**Issues for analysis and evaluation will be drawn from any aspect of the content above, such as:**

- The relevant importance of the Sikh concept of God in relation to other concepts.
- Whether the most important Sikh teaching about God is that God is personal.
- The impact of Sikh teachings about the soul on the Sikh view of humanity.
- The relationship between God and the soul in Sikhism – monist or monotheistic.
- The relevance of Sikh beliefs about rebirth and mukti for Sikhs today.
- The influence of belief in karma on Sikh lifestyle.

# Issues for analysis and evaluation

The relevance of Sikh beliefs about rebirth and *mukti* for Sikhs today.

## The relevance of Sikh beliefs about rebirth and *mukti* for Sikhs today

### A02 Activity

#### Possible lines of argument

Listed below are some conclusions that could be drawn from the A02 reasoning in the accompanying text:

- Sikhs may be aware, to different degrees, that the Gurus were responding to long-existent ideas of rebirth and *muktī* in order to stress the value and opportunity of human life and that it can be lived in a spiritually liberated way.
- The resultant stress on how one lives in the here and now is reflected in Sikh ethics e.g. hard work and social contribution which diminish a preoccupation with past or future lives.
- Ideas of rebirth and *muktī* are very relevant to the way Sikhs understand and approach birth and death.
- For Sikhs concerned about global societal challenges, the notion of *muktī* as liberation from ego-driven thinking is highly relevant.

Consider each of the conclusions drawn above and collect evidence and examples to support each argument from the A01 and A02 material studied in this section. Select one conclusion that you think is most convincing and explain why it is so. Now contrast this with the weakest conclusion in the list, justifying your argument with clear reasoning and evidence.

As the Sikh faith emerged, the concepts of rebirth and *muktī* were common to the world-view held by many people in India, since they were basic to Hindu, Jain and Buddhist thoughts. The Sikh Gurus accepted these concepts, yet drew on them with particular priorities in mind. In their scriptural verse, they presented the panorama of births and deaths across life forms to underline that birth as a human was a unique and precious opportunity to kindle the latent spark of God within. Each of us is therefore, a traveller, who visits the world on a temporary stay. This set a context for the Gurus to establish teachings and practices (i.e. what became the Sikh *dharam* or faith) to help make that stay meaningful and purposeful. Whilst they accepted that *muktī* (when understood as liberation from the cycles of birth and death) could be an outcome of enlightened living, they highlighted the risk it could be taken as a self-centred motive for doing good deeds. Such a pursuit could not liberate a person from *haumai*, the self-centred ego. They emphasized, therefore, the aim of living as a *jīvan-mukat*, one who is spiritually liberated in the here and now.

Most Sikhs will therefore have a basic understanding of the principles of rebirth and *muktī* from the way they pervade Indian culture and are mentioned in Sikh verses they will routinely hear recited or sung. Some Sikhs will be more aware than others of the distinctive and purposeful ways in which the Gurus drew on these concepts. Either way, Sikh tradition puts considerable emphasis on how one lives one's present life, given its strong ethic of work and sharing and the way Sikhs may be concerned to do 'what's right' as an expression of dedication to the legacy of the Gurus and to God. This serves to diminish a preoccupation with past and future lives, even though a belief in them is there.

One way in which the notion of rebirth is relevant to Sikh life is around the times of birth and death. A new-born is not considered a 'blank slate' of new life; rather he or she is a migrant soul who has 'landed' into a new existence. People might consider some of the young child's inclinations as those imprinted from a previous life; they will assume he or she brings some latent prior knowledge and inherent spiritual dispositions, which can be neglected or nurtured. A baby is, thus, not viewed as a novice to the world, but a returning soul. Similarly, as a person reaches the end of life, beliefs in rebirth and *muktī* diminish the sense of finality and encourage an attitude of letting go to allow for the soul's onward journey. Facing death, a person may express that it is time for one's soul to change its 'garment'. Some Sikhs may be habituated to Punjabi cultural traditions which encourage heightened expressions of grief; others may prioritise the prayerfulness and acceptance which are encouraged in Sikh teachings.

Similarly, whilst the belief in *muktī* in the afterlife is accepted, Sikh teachings refrain from making this a preoccupation. In the *ardās* prayer of supplication to God, Sikhs ask for the gift of *nām* (the awareness to be cultivated of God's presence), of *bharosā* (faith), of '*Sikhī*' (the Sikh way of life) but not for the gift of *muktī*. Freedom from the grip of *haumai* is relevant to Sikh concerns for personal and social flourishing and this lies behind many of the scriptural analogies about liberation and overcoming enslavement. The destructive effects of greed, hypocrisy, exploitation and arrogance which were observed by the Gurus remain challenges for our world today, underpinning problems such as the financial crisis, poverty, human trafficking and war. Sikhs will see many

aspects of their identity, teachings and practices as a vehicle for liberating the mind from these tendencies and setting the ground for spiritual virtues to flourish.

## The influence of the belief in karma on Sikh lifestyle.

### AO2 Activity

#### Possible lines of argument

Listed below are some conclusions that could be drawn from the AO2 reasoning in the accompanying text:

- Sikhs accept that karma operates as one of the forces governing our lives, but they understand that human agency and divine grace can play a transformative role.
- A belief in karma leads Sikhs to understand a need to accept or work around life circumstances which seem difficult to change.
- Core values of being hopeful and positive also strongly influence Sikh approaches to living, leading them to resist overly deterministic or pessimistic views of karma.
- Sikhs may give different weight to the role of karma, grace and human initiative and this will be reflected in how they shape their lives and respond to life circumstances.

Consider each of the conclusions drawn above and collect evidence and examples to support each argument from the AO1 and AO2 material studied in this section. Select one conclusion that you think is most convincing and explain why it is so. Now contrast this with the weakest conclusion in the list, justifying your argument with clear reasoning and evidence.

## The influence of the belief in karma on Sikh lifestyle

When we talk about 'Sikh lifestyle', this can mean ways of living which arise from one's birth and upbringing in a Sikh family or from one's formal initiation into the faith. In either case, there will be some diversity as well as some common threads. One thread is an acceptance of the role of karma, the principle that our actions have after-effects in this life and across lifetimes. We have studied a number of ways in which Sikh teachings draw attention to the role of human agency and the role of divine grace. Whilst this means that life is not seen as overly predetermined, Sikhs nevertheless appreciate that to some degree we have to reap what we have sown in terms of the consequences of our actions in this or prior existences.

Karma is therefore acknowledged by Sikhs as one of the forces which exerts effects on shaping the course of our life. It exists as part of the indescribable *hukam* or divine will, which determines the basic laws, conditions and flow of existence. Sikhs will to a degree accept aspects of their life circumstances as the fruit of '*apne karam*', the Punjabi phrase that means one's own past actions and their consequences. In everyday life, this can encourage an acceptance of the joy and success enjoyed by others, as the fruit of their previous unknown *karam*. It also encourages a degree of acceptance of the difficulties one may personally encounter because one may be experiencing them as the after-effects of previous unknown *karam*. The family or social bonds we form with others will sometimes be described as stemming from previous associations shared with others in past lives. Thus, a present-day relationship may be seen as an arena in which there are *karmic* debts to be settled and there is a principle of '*lehnā denā*' or 'give and take' to be played out. Sikhs will thus talk about accepting one's *karam* as well as accepting the *hukam* to explain aspects of life we cannot readily shape or change.

Despite this basic acceptance, Sikhs see their *dharam* or faith as having emerged in response to excessively deterministic views of karma. Such views could lead people to feel trapped in disadvantage or to feel deserving of their privileges in ways that perpetuated social injustices and inequalities. This could give rise to passive or pessimistic attitudes with no hope or vision to change the status quo. For this reason, in everyday life, Sikhs will bring to mind, or pray to be blessed with, qualities such as '*udham*' (initiative or industrious effort), '*himmat*' (courage) and '*chardī kalā*' (positivity) which they see reflected in Sikh teachings and in examples from Sikh history. They will make reference to *kirat*, having a strong work ethic, as one of the three founding values for Sikh life. In practice, this might encourage attitudes of being hard-working, avoiding despondency, being hopeful and finding solutions to challenging predicaments. They will also end their daily prayers seeking God's blessings and grace. In these ways, there is a resistance to viewing karma as the sole decider of human fates.

Weighing up contrasting ways of looking at the belief in karma from the Sikh perspective, we can say that it is partially influencing how Sikhs live. Different people might give different weight to the power of human initiative and potential, divine grace and the law of karma in shaping their lives and this will come through in their attitudes and approach to life as well as their actions.