

Bexley City Schools

Interfaith Awareness Resource

Edition IV: December 2024



The purpose of this document is to:

- Build cultural competency within the Bexley community
- Provide resources to teachers and administrators to gain an increased awareness of the customs, traditions, celebrations, and observances of the various world religions.

Curated by the Bexley Culture Climate Team

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Building Understanding



For centuries, humankind has sought to understand and explain “the meaning of life.” Many philosophers believe this contemplation and the desire to understand our place in the universe are what differentiate humankind from other species. Religion, in one form or another, has been found in all human societies since human societies first appeared. Archaeological digs have revealed ritual objects, ceremonial burial sites, and other religious artifacts. Social conflict and even wars often result from religious disputes.


What is religion? Pioneer sociologist Émile Durkheim described it with the ethereal statement that it consists of “things that surpass the limits of our knowledge” (1915). He went on to elaborate: Religion is “a unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things, that is to say set apart and forbidden, beliefs and practices which unite into one single moral community, called a church, all those who adhere to them” (1915). Some people associate religion with places of worship (a synagogue or church), others with a practice (confession or meditation), and still others with a concept that guides their daily lives (like dharma or sin). All these people can agree that **religion** is a system of beliefs, values, and practices concerning what a person holds sacred or considers to be spiritually significant.

Does religion bring fear, wonder, relief, explanation of the unknown or control over freedom and choice? How do our religious perspectives affect our behavior? These are questions sociologists ask and are reasons they study religion. What are peoples' conceptions of the profane and the sacred? How do religious ideas affect the real-world reactions and choices of people in a society?

Religion can serve as a filter for examining other issues in society and other components of a culture. For example, after the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, and later during the rise of the terrorist group ISIS, it became important for teachers, church leaders, and the media to educate Americans about Islam to prevent stereotyping and to promote religious tolerance. Sociological tools and methods, such as surveys, polls, interviews, and analysis of historical data, can be applied to the study of religion in a culture to help us better understand the role religion plays in people's lives and the way it influences society.

The practice of religion can include feasts and festivals, intercession with God or gods, marriage and funeral services, music and art, meditation or initiation, sacrifice or service, and other aspects of culture. While some people think of religion as something individual because religious beliefs can be highly personal, religion is also a social institution. Social scientists recognize that religion exists as an organized and integrated set of beliefs, behaviors, and norms centered on basic social needs and values. Moreover, religion is a cultural universal found in all social groups. For instance, in every culture, funeral rites are practiced in some way, although these customs vary between cultures and within religious affiliations. Despite differences, there are common elements in a ceremony marking a person's death, such as announcement of the death, care of the deceased, disposition, and ceremony or ritual.

In studying religion, sociologists distinguish between what they term the experience, beliefs, and rituals of a religion. **Religious experience** refers to the conviction or sensation that we are connected to “the divine.” This type of communion might be



experienced when people pray or meditate. **Religious beliefs** are specific ideas members of a particular faith hold to be true, such as that Jesus Christ was the son of God, or that reincarnation exists. Another illustration of religious beliefs is the creation stories we find in different religions. **Religious rituals** are behaviors or practices that are either required or expected of the members of a particular group, such as bar mitzvah or confession of sins

The increasingly pluralistic population of the United States is made up of many different ethnic, cultural, faith and religious communities. Religion has been a cornerstone of human civilization, offering a sense of meaning, community, and identity to billions of people around the world. The beliefs, customs, traditions, and practices of the world's religions are as diverse as the cultures that embrace them, ranging from solemn rituals to vibrant festivals and from individual meditative practices to communal worship. Religious and faith commitments also have a significant influence upon the everyday lives of many people. Depending on family origin, there may also be cultural differences that are influenced by a person's heritage. Ultimately, religious practices and traditions are a marker of the diverse beliefs held by people across the globe.


Core Characteristics and Beliefs of the World's Major Religions

Religions organize themselves—their institutions, practitioners, and structures—in a variety of fashions. For instance, when the Roman Catholic Church emerged, it borrowed many of its organizational principles from the ancient Roman military and turned senators into cardinals. Sociologists use different terms, like *ecclesia*, denomination, and sect, to define these types of organizations. Scholars are also aware that these definitions are not static. Most religions transition through different organizational phases. For example, Christianity began as a cult, transformed into a sect, and today exists as an *ecclesia*.

Cults are new religious movements and are often characterized as small, secretive, and highly controlling of members and may have a charismatic leader. In the United States today this term often carries pejorative connotations. However, almost all religions began as cults and gradually progressed to levels of greater size and organization. The term cult is sometimes used interchangeably with the term new religious movement (NRM). The new term may be an attempt to lessen the negativity that the term 'cult' has amassed.

Controversy exists over whether some groups are cults, perhaps due in part to media sensationalism over groups like polygamous Mormons or the Peoples Temple followers who died at Jonestown, Guyana. Some groups that are controversially labeled as cults today include the Church of Scientology and the Hare Krishna movement.

A **sect** is an offshoot of a larger religious group that has distinct beliefs and practices that deviate from that group. Most of the well-known Christian denominations in the United States today began as sects. For example, the Methodists and Baptists protested against their parent Anglican Church in England, just as Henry VIII protested against the Catholic Church by forming the Anglican Church. From "protest" comes the term Protestant.



Occasionally, a sect is a breakaway group that may be in tension with larger society. They sometimes claim to be returning to “the fundamentals” or to contest the veracity of a particular doctrine. When membership in a sect increases over time, it may grow into a denomination. Often a sect begins as an offshoot of a denomination, when a group of members believes they should separate from the larger group.

Some sects do not grow into denominations. Sociologists call these **established sects**. Established sects, such as the Amish or Jehovah’s Witnesses fall halfway between sect and denomination on the ecclesia–cult continuum because they have a mixture of sect-like and denomination-like characteristics.

A **denomination** is a large, mainstream religious organization, but it does not claim to be official or state sponsored. It is one religion among many. For example, Baptist, African Methodist Episcopal, Catholic, and Seventh-day Adventist are all Christian denominations.

The term **ecclesia**, originally referring to a political assembly of citizens in ancient Athens, Greece, now refers to a congregation. In sociology, the term is used to refer to a religious group that most all members of a society belong to. It is considered a nationally recognized, or official, religion that holds a religious monopoly and is closely allied with state and secular powers. The United States does not have an ecclesia by this standard; in fact, this is the type of religious organization that many of the first colonists came to America to escape.

There are many countries in Europe, Asia, Central and South America, and Africa that are considered to have an official state-church. Most of their citizens share similar beliefs, and the state-church has significant involvement in national institutions, which includes restricting the behavior of those with different belief systems. The state-church of England is the Church of England or the Anglican Church established in the 16th century by King Henry VIII. In Saudi Arabia, Islamic law is enforced, and public display of any other religion is illegal. Using this definition then, it can be said that the major Abrahamic systems of Christianity, Judaism, and Islam, are ecclesia; in some regions, they are considered a state-church.

One way to remember these religious organizational terms is to think of cults, sects, denominations, and ecclesia representing a continuum, with increasing influence on society, where cults are least influential and ecclesia are most influential.

Religions are also distinguished by the number of Gods that are worshiped. Who or what people worship or hold to be divine. For instance, the Christian notion of the Holy Trinity (God, Jesus, Holy Spirit) defies the definition of **monotheism**, which is a religion based on belief in a single deity. The three most well-known monotheistic religions are Judaism, Christianity, and Islam:

- **Christianity:** Christians believe in one God who exists as a threefold unit, the Trinity: God, the Father; God, the Son; and God, the Holy Spirit.
- **Islam:** Muslims worship Allah and have a direct relationship with God. Muslims pray five times a day, at dawn, noon, late afternoon, sunset, and night.

- Judaism: Jews believe in one God.

Similarly, many Westerners view the multiple manifestations of Hinduism's godhead as **polytheistic**, which is a religion based on belief in multiple deities. Polytheism characterizes virtually all religions other than Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. Sometimes above the many gods a polytheistic religion will have a supreme creator and focus of devotion, as in certain phases of Hinduism; sometimes the gods are considered as less important than some higher goal, state, or saviour, as in Buddhism; sometimes one god will prove more dominant than the others without attaining overall supremacy, as Zeus in Greek religion.

Some Japanese practice Shinto, which follows **animism**, which is a religion that believes in the divinity of nonhuman beings, like animals, plants, and objects of the natural world, while people who practice **totemism** believe in a divine connection between humans and other natural beings.

It is also important to note that every society also has nonbelievers, such as **atheists**, who do not believe in a divine being or entity, and **agnostics**, who hold that ultimate reality (such as God) is unknowable. While typically not an organized group, atheists and agnostics represent a significant portion of the population. It is important to recognize that being a nonbeliever in a divine entity does not mean the individual subscribes to no morality. Indeed, many Nobel Peace Prize winners and other great humanitarians over the centuries would have classified themselves as atheists or agnostics.

The World's Classical Religions and Philosophies

The core characteristics and beliefs of the world's major religions are described below. They are Baha'i, Buddhism, Christianity, Confucianism, Hinduism, Islam, Jainism, Judaism, Shinto, Sikhism, Taoism, and Zoroastrianism.

Baha'i - Founded by Mirza Husayn-Ali (known as Baha'u'llah) in Iran in 1852, Baha'i faith emphasizes monotheism and believes in one eternal transcendent God. Its guiding focus is to encourage the unity of all peoples so that justice and peace may be achieved on earth. Baha'i revelation contends that the prophets of major world religions reflect some truth or element of the divine, believes all were manifestations of God given to specific communities in specific times, and believes that Baha'u'llah is an additional prophet meant to call all humankind. Bahais are an open community, located worldwide, with the greatest concentration of believers in South Asia.

Buddhism - Religion or philosophy inspired by the fifth-century-B.C. teachings of Siddhartha Gautama (also known as Gautama Buddha, or "the enlightened one"). Buddhism focuses on the goal of spiritual enlightenment centered on an understanding of Gautama Buddha's Four Noble Truths on the nature of suffering and on the Eightfold Path of spiritual and moral practice, to break the cycle of suffering. Buddhism ascribes to a karmic system of rebirth. Several schools and sects of Buddhism exist, differing often on the nature of the Buddha, the extent to which enlightenment can be achieved (for one or for all) and by whom (religious orders or laity).

Basic Groupings of Buddhism

- **Theravada Buddhism:** The oldest Buddhist school, Theravada is practiced mostly in Sri Lanka, Cambodia, Laos, Burma, and Thailand, with minority representation elsewhere in Asia and the West. Theravadans follow the Pali Canon of Buddha's teachings, and believe that one may escape the cycle of rebirth, worldly attachment, and suffering for oneself; this process may take one or several lifetimes.
- **Mahayana Buddhism,** including subsets Zen and Tibetan (Lamaistic) Buddhism: Forms of Mahayana Buddhism are common in East Asia and Tibet, and parts of the West. Mahayanas have additional scriptures beyond the Pali Canon and believe the Buddha is eternal and still teaching. Unlike Theravada Buddhism, Mahayana schools maintain that the Buddha-nature is present in all beings, and all will ultimately achieve enlightenment.
- **Hoa Hao:** a minority tradition of Buddhism practiced in Vietnam that stresses lay participation, primarily by peasant farmers; it eschews expensive ceremonies and temples and relocates the primary practices into the home.

Christianity - Descending from Judaism, Christianity's central belief maintains that Jesus of Nazareth is the promised messiah of the Hebrew Scriptures, and that his life, death, and resurrection are salvific for the world. Christianity is one of the three monotheistic Abrahamic faiths, along with Islam and Judaism, that trace their spiritual lineage to Abraham of the Hebrew Scriptures. Christianity's sacred texts include the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament (or the Christian Gospels). The largest group of Christians in the United States are members of the Protestant religions, including members of the Baptist, Episcopal, Lutheran, Methodist, Pentecostal, and other churches. However, more people identify as Catholic than any one of those individual Protestant religions (Pew Research Center, 2020).

Basic Groupings of Christianity

- **Catholicism (or Roman Catholicism):** This is the oldest established western Christian church and the world's largest single religious body. It is supranational and recognizes a hierarchical structure with the Pope, or Bishop of Rome, as its head, located at the Vatican. Catholics believe the Pope is the divinely ordered head of the Church, from a direct spiritual legacy of Jesus's apostle Peter. Catholicism is composed of 23 particular Churches, or Rites -- one Western (Roman or Latin-Rite) and 22 Eastern. The Latin Rite is by far the largest, making up about 98% of Catholic membership. Eastern-Rite Churches, such as the Maronite Church and the Ukrainian Catholic Church, are in communion with Rome although they preserve their own worship traditions, and their immediate hierarchy consists of clergy within their own rite. The Catholic Church has a comprehensive theological and moral doctrine specified for believers in its catechism, which makes it unique among most forms of Christianity.
- **The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints:** The Church was organized in 1830 and teaches that it is the restoration of Jesus Christ's original church. It

embraces salvation through Christ, personal revelation, and has an open canon, including the King James Bible and the Book of Mormon, which is another testament of Christ's divinity. The Book of Mormon maintains that there was an appearance of Jesus in the New World following the Christian account of his resurrection, and that the Americas are uniquely blessed continents. The Church has a centralized doctrine and leadership structure but has volunteer lay clergy who oversee local congregations in 176 countries and territories.

- **Jehovah's Witnesses:** This group structures its faith on the Christian Bible, but its rejection of the Trinity is distinct from mainstream Christianity. They believe that a Kingdom of God, the Theocracy, will emerge following Armageddon and usher in a new earthly society. Adherents are required to evangelize and follow a strict moral code.
- **Orthodox Christianity:** The oldest established eastern form of Christianity, the Holy Orthodox Church, has a ceremonial head in the Bishop of Constantinople (Istanbul), also known as a Patriarch, but its various regional forms (e.g., Greek Orthodox, Russian Orthodox, Serbian Orthodox, Ukrainian Orthodox) are autocephalous (independent of Constantinople's authority and have their own Patriarchs). Orthodox churches are highly nationalist and ethnic. The Orthodox Christian faith shares many theological tenets with the Roman Catholic Church, but it diverges on some key premises and does not recognize the governing authority of the Pope.
- **Protestant Christianity:** Protestant Christianity originated in the 16th century as an attempt to reform Roman Catholicism's practices, dogma, and theology. It encompasses several forms or denominations which are extremely varied in structure, beliefs, relationship to national governments, clergy, and governance. Many Protestant theologies emphasize the primary role of scripture in their faith, advocating individual interpretation of Christian texts without the mediation of a final religious authority such as the Roman Pope. The oldest Protestant denominations include Lutheranism, Calvinism (Presbyterianism), and Anglican Christianity (Episcopalianism), which have established liturgies, governing structure, and formal clergy. Other variants on Protestant Christianity, including Pentecostal movements and independent churches, may lack one or more of these elements, and their leadership and beliefs are individualized and dynamic.

Hinduism - Originating in the Vedic civilization of India (second and first millennium B.C.), Hinduism is an extremely diverse set of beliefs and practices with no single founder or religious authority. Hinduism has many scriptures; the Vedas, the Upanishads, and the Bhagavad-Gita are some of the most important. Hindus may worship one or many deities, usually with prayer rituals within their own home. The most common figures of devotion are the gods Vishnu, Shiva, and a mother goddess, Devi. Most Hindus believe the soul, or *atman*, is eternal, and goes through a cycle of birth, death, and rebirth (*samsara*) determined by one's positive or negative karma, or the consequences of one's actions. The goal of religious life is to learn to act so as to finally achieve liberation (*moksha*) of one's soul, escaping the rebirth cycle.

Islam - One of the three monotheistic Abrahamic faiths, Islam originated with the teachings of Muhammad in the seventh century. Muslims believe Muhammad is the final of all religious prophets (beginning with Abraham) and that the Quran, which is the Islamic scripture, was revealed to him by God. Islam derives from the word "submission," and obedience to God is a primary theme in this religion. In order to live an Islamic life, believers must follow the five pillars, or tenets, of Islam, which are the testimony of faith (*shahada*), daily prayer (*salah*), giving alms (*zakah*), fasting during Ramadan (*sawm*), and the pilgrimage to Mecca (*hajj*).


Basic Groupings of Islam

The two primary branches of Islam are **Sunni** and **Shia**, which split from each other over a religio-political leadership dispute about the rightful successor to Muhammad. The Shia believe Muhammad's cousin and son-in-law, Ali, was the only divinely ordained Imam (religious leader), while the Sunni maintain that the first three caliphs after Muhammad were also legitimate authorities. In modern Islam, Sunnis and Shia continue to have different views of acceptable schools of Islamic jurisprudence and who is a proper Islamic religious authority. Islam also has an active mystical branch, Sufism, with various Sunni and Shia subsets.

- **Sunni** Islam accounts for 87-90% of the world's Muslim population. It recognizes the Abu Bakr as the first caliph after Muhammad. Sunni has four schools of Islamic doctrine and law -- Hanafi, Maliki, Shafi'i, and Hanbali -- which uniquely interpret the *Hadith*, or recorded oral traditions of Muhammad. A Sunni Muslim may elect to follow any one of these schools, as all are considered equally valid.
- **Shia** Islam represents 10-13% of Muslims worldwide, and its distinguishing feature is its reverence for Ali as an infallible, divinely inspired leader and as the first Imam after Muhammad. A majority of Shia are known as "Twelvers," because they believe that the 11 familial successor imams after Muhammad culminate in a 12th Imam (al-Mahdi) who is hidden in the world and will reappear at its end to redeem the righteous.

Variants of Islam

- **Ismaili faith:** A sect of Shia Islam, its adherents are also known as "Seveners," because they believe that the rightful seventh Imam in Islamic leadership was Isma'il, the elder son of Imam Jafar al-Sadiq. Ismaili tradition awaits the return of the seventh Imam as the Mahdi, or Islamic messianic figure. Ismailis are located in various parts of the world, particularly South Asia and the Levant.
- **Alawi faith:** Another Shia sect of Islam, the name reflects followers' devotion to the religious authority of Ali. Alawites are a closed, secretive religious group who assert that they are Shia Muslims, although outside scholars speculate their beliefs may have a syncretic mix with other faiths originating in the Middle East. Alawis live mostly in Syria, Lebanon, and Turkey.
- **Druze faith:** A highly secretive tradition and a closed community that derives from the Ismaili sect of Islam; its core beliefs are thought to emphasize a combination of



Gnostic principles asserting that the Fatimid caliph, al-Hakim, is the one who embodies the key aspects of goodness of the universe, which are the intellect, the word, the soul, the preceder, and the follower. The Druze have a key presence in Syria, Lebanon, and Israel.

Jainism - Originating in India, the Jain philosophy believes in an eternal human soul, the eternal universe, and a principle of "the own nature of things." It emphasizes compassion for all living things, seeks liberation of the human soul from reincarnation through enlightenment, and values personal responsibility due to the belief in the immediate consequences of one's behavior. Jain philosophy teaches non-violence and prescribes vegetarianism for monks and laity alike; its adherents are a highly influential religious minority in Indian society.

Judaism - One of the first known monotheistic religions, likely dating to between 2000-1500 B.C., Judaism is the native faith of the Jewish people, based upon the belief of a covenant or promise of a special relationship with Yahweh (God). The sacred text of Judaism is the Torah, which contains the same sacred stories in the first five books of the Christian's Bible. Talmud is a collection of additional sacred Jewish oral interpretations of the Torah. Jews emphasize moral behavior and action in life. Jewish religious services are held in a synagogue. Divine revelation of principles and prohibitions in the Hebrew Scriptures form the basis of Jewish law, or *halakhah*, which is a key component of the faith. While there are extensive traditions of Jewish halakhic and theological discourse, there is no final dogmatic authority in the tradition. Local communities have their own religious leadership. Modern Judaism has three basic categories of faith: Orthodox, Conservative, and Reform/Liberal. These differ in their views and observance of Jewish law, with the Orthodox representing the most traditional practice, and Reform/Liberal communities the most accommodating of individualized interpretations of Jewish identity and faith.

Shintoism - A native animist tradition of Japan, Shinto practice is based on the premise that every being and object has its own spirit or *kami*. Shinto practitioners worship several particular *kamis*, including the *kamis* of nature, and families often have shrines to their ancestors' *kamis*. Shintoism has no fixed tradition of prayers or prescribed dogma and is characterized by individual ritual. Respect for the *kamis* in nature is a key Shinto value. Prior to the end of World War II, Shinto was the state religion of Japan and bolstered the cult of the Japanese emperor.

Sikhism - Founded by Guru Nanak (born 1469), Sikhism believes in a non-anthropomorphic, supreme, eternal, creator God; centering one's devotion to God is seen as a means of escaping the cycle of rebirth. Sikhs follow the teachings of Nanak and nine subsequent gurus. Their scripture, the Guru Granth Sahib -- also known as the Adi Granth -- is considered the living Guru, or final authority of Sikh faith and theology. Sikhism emphasizes equality of humankind and disavows caste, class, or gender discrimination.

Taoism - Chinese philosophy or religion based upon Lao Tzu's Tao Te Ching, which centers on belief in the Tao, or the way, as the flow of the universe and the nature of things. Taoism encourages a principle of non-force, or wu-wei, as the means to live harmoniously with the Tao. Taoists believe the esoteric world is made up of a perfect

harmonious balance and nature, while in the manifest world -- particularly in the body -- balance is distorted. The Three Jewels of the Tao are compassion, simplicity, and humility and serve as the basis for Taoist ethics.

Zoroastrianism - Originating from the teachings of Zoroaster in about the ninth or 10th century B.C., Zoroastrianism may be the oldest continuing creedal religion. Its key beliefs center on a transcendent creator God, Ahura Mazda, and the concept of free will. The key ethical tenets of Zoroastrianism expressed in its scripture, the Avesta, are based on a dualistic worldview where one may prevent chaos if one chooses to serve God and exercises good thoughts, good words, and good deeds. Zoroastrianism is generally a closed religion and members are almost always born to Zoroastrian parents. Prior to the spread of Islam, Zoroastrianism dominated greater Iran. Today, though a minority, Zoroastrians remain primarily in Iran, India (where they are known as Parsi), and Pakistan.

Traditional beliefs

Animism: the belief that non-human entities contain souls or spirits.

Badimo: a form of ancestor worship of the Tswana people of Botswana.

Confucianism: an ideology that humans are perfectible through self-cultivation and self-creation; developed from teachings of the Chinese philosopher Confucius. Confucianism has strongly influenced the culture and beliefs of East Asian countries, including China, Japan, Korea, Singapore, Taiwan, and Vietnam.

Inuit beliefs: a form of shamanism (see below) based on the animistic principles of the Inuit or Eskimo peoples.

Kirant: the belief system of the Kirat, a people who live mainly in the Himalayas of Nepal. It is primarily a form of polytheistic shamanism but includes elements of animism and ancestor worship.

Pagan: a blanket term used to describe many unconnected belief practices throughout history, usually in reference to religions outside the Abrahamic category (monotheistic faiths including Judaism, Christianity, and Islam).

Shamanism: beliefs and practices promoting communication with the spiritual world. Shamanistic beliefs are organized around a shaman or medicine man who -- as an intermediary between the human and spirit world -- is believed to be able to heal the sick, communicate with the spirit world, and help souls into the afterlife through the practice of entering a trance. In shaman-based religions, the shaman is also responsible for leading sacred rites.

Spiritualism: the belief that souls and spirits communicate with the living usually through intermediaries called mediums.

Syncretic (fusion of diverse religious beliefs and practices)

- **Cao Dai:** a nationalistic Vietnamese sect, officially established in 1926, that draws practices and precepts from Confucianism, Taoism, Buddhism, and Catholicism.

- **Chondogyo** or the religion of the Heavenly Way: based on Korean shamanism, Buddhism, and Korean folk traditions, with some elements drawn from Christianity. Formulated in the 1860s, it holds that God lives in all of us and strives to convert society into a paradise on earth that will be populated by believers transformed into intelligent moral beings with a high social conscience.
- **Kimbanguism**: a puritan form of the Baptist denomination founded by Simon Kimbangu in the 1920s in what is now the Democratic Republic of Congo. Adherents believe that salvation comes through Jesus' death and resurrection, like Christianity, but additionally that living a spiritually pure life following strict codes of conduct is required for salvation.
- **Modekngai**: a hybrid of Christianity and ancient Palauan culture and oral traditions founded around 1915 on the island of Babeldaob. Adherents simultaneously worship Jesus Christ and Palauan goddesses.
- **Rastafarianism**: an afro-centrist ideology and movement based on Christianity that arose in Jamaica in the 1930s; it believes that Haile Selassie I, Emperor of Ethiopia from 1930-74, was the incarnation of the second coming of Jesus.
- **Santeria**: practiced in Cuba, the merging of the Yoruba religion of Nigeria with Roman Catholicism and native Indian traditions. Its practitioners believe that each person has a destiny and eventually transcends to merge with the divine creator and source of all energy, Olorun.
- **Voodoo/Vodun**: a form of spirit and ancestor worship combined with some Christian faiths, especially Catholicism. Haitian and Louisiana Voodoo, which have included more Catholic practices, are separate from West African Vodun, which has retained a focus on spirit worship.


Non-religious

- **Agnosticism**: the belief that most things are unknowable. In regard to religion, it is usually characterized as neither a belief nor non-belief in a deity.
- **Atheism**: the belief that there are no deities of any kind.

Celebrating Faith: Festivals and Holy Days

Religious festivals and holy days are expressions of faith that bind communities and generations. In Hinduism, Diwali or the Festival of Lights, symbolizes the victory of light over darkness and good over evil. Families light lamps, set off fireworks, and share sweets in a joyous celebration of prosperity and hope.

Christianity's Christmas commemorates the birth of Jesus Christ, bringing families together in a season of giving and a spirit of celebration. Judaism observes several major festivals, and views sports and physical activity as a means of building and sustaining a vibrant Jewish and civil community.



For Muslims, Ramadan is a month of fasting, reflection, and community, culminating in Eid-al-Fitr, a celebration marked by communal prayers, feasts, and charity.


In the end, every religion has its own unique celebrations, and they play a critical role in the lives of those who follow various faiths. There are various customs and traditions that followers engage in that may impact a student/staff's school experience. As always, as a school community we should all be respectful of a person's specific values, practices, and beliefs and provide accommodations where appropriate.

Religious practices that could impact a student's learning in the classroom might include: observing fasting periods during school hours, needing to leave class for religious holidays or prayers, dietary restrictions based on religious beliefs, wearing specific religious clothing that could be disruptive, or experiencing anxiety or stress due to conflicting religious beliefs with classroom material; all of which could potentially affect their ability to fully participate in class activities or focus on academics.

Key points to consider:

- **Dietary restrictions:** Certain religions have specific dietary rules, like not eating pork or requiring halal meat, which could present challenges in school cafeteria options.
- **Observance of religious holidays:** Students may need to miss school or leave class for important religious holidays, potentially impacting their attendance and coursework.
- **Prayer times:** Some religions require regular prayer throughout the day, which could necessitate short breaks from class for prayer.
- **Religious clothing:** Wearing specific religious attire, like head coverings, might draw attention or cause discomfort for some students, potentially leading to social issues.
- **Religious teachings conflicting with curriculum:** Certain topics discussed in class might contradict a student's religious beliefs, causing internal conflict or reluctance to participate.

How schools can manage religious practices in the classroom:

- **Open communication:** Encourage students to discuss any religious needs or concerns with their teachers to find accommodations.
 - **Respectful approach:** Educate teachers and students about different religious practices to foster understanding and respect.
 - **Flexibility with assignments:** Provide alternative assignments or deadlines when necessary to accommodate religious observances.
 - **Private spaces for prayer:** Designate a quiet area where students can pray during breaks if needed.
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- **Collaboration with families:** Work with parents to understand their child's specific religious needs and how to best support them in school.

Interfaith Calendar Observances 2025

January 2025

- **January 6 – Christian: Epiphany**
Celebrates the visit of the Magi to the baby Jesus.
- **January 7 – Coptic Orthodox Christian: Christmas**
Marks the birth of Jesus Christ according to the Julian calendar.
- **January 14 – Hindu: Pongal**
A harvest festival thanking the Sun God for the agricultural abundance.
- **January 14 – Buddhist: Mahayana New Year**
Celebrates the Buddhist New Year in Mahayana traditions.
- **January 17 – Sikh: Guru Gobind Singh Gurburab**
Celebrates the birth of Guru Gobind Singh, the Sikhs' 10th master and teacher.

February 2025

- **February 2 – Pagan and Wiccan: Imbolc***
Celebrates the beginning of spring and the goddess Brigid.
- **February 2 – Christian: Candlemas**
Commemorates the presentation of Jesus at the temple.
- **February 12 - Tu BiShvat**
In remembrance that “man is a tree of the field”
- **February 15 – Buddhist: Parinirvana**
Marks the death of Buddha and his attainment of final Nirvana.
- **February 26 – Hindu: Maha Shivaratri**
A major Hindu festival celebrating Lord Shiva.

March 2025

- **March 1 – Islamic: Ramadan begins***
A holy month of fasting, prayer, and reflection for Muslims.
- **March 5 – Christian: Ash Wednesday**
Marks the beginning of Lent, a season of fasting and prayer.
- **March 14 – Hindu: Holi**
The festival of colors, celebrating the arrival of spring. This is one of the most known [Hinduism holy days](#).
- **March 14 – Sikh: Hola Mohalla**
A Sikh festival featuring martial arts, poetry, and community gatherings.
- **March 20 – Baha’i: Naw-Ruz***
The Baha’i New Year, celebrated with joy and festivities.
- **March 31 – Islamic: Eid al-Fitr***
Marks the end of Ramadan, celebrated with a feast and prayers. On one of the most important [Islamic holy days](#).

April 2025

- **April 10 – Jain: Mahavir Jayanti**
Celebrates the birth of Lord Mahavira, the founder of Jainism.
- **April 12 – Jehovah’s Witnesses: The Memorial of Jesus’ Death**
Commemorates the death of Jesus Christ.
- **April 13-20 – Jewish: Passover***
Celebrates the liberation of the Israelites from Egyptian slavery.
- **April 14 – Sikh, Hindu: Vaisakhi**
Marks the Sikh New Year and celebrates the spring harvest.
- **April 20 – Christian: Easter**
Celebrates the resurrection of Jesus Christ.

May 2025

- **May 1 – Pagan and Wiccan: Beltane***
Celebrates the peak of spring and the coming of summer.
- **May 5 – Buddhist: Buddha’s Birthday**
Celebrates the birth of Siddhartha Gautama, the founder of Buddhism.
- **May 12 – Buddhist: Vesak**
Commemorates the birth, enlightenment, and death of Buddha.
- **May 16 – Jewish: Lag BaOmer***
A festive day marking the end of a plague during Rabbi Akiva’s lifetime.
- **May 28 – Baha’i: Ascension of Baha’u’llah***
Commemorates the passing of Baha’u’llah, the founder of the Baha’i Faith.

June 2025

- **June 2-3 – Jewish: Shavuot***
Celebrates the giving of the Torah at Mount Sinai.
- **June 5-9 – Islamic: The Hajj***
An annual Islamic pilgrimage to Mecca, mandatory for all Muslims.
- **June 7-10 – Islamic: Eid-al-Adha***
Commemorates the willingness of Ibrahim to sacrifice his son.
- **June 8 – Christian: Pentecost (Whit Sunday)**
Commemorates the descent of the Holy Spirit upon the Apostles.
- **June 19 – Roman Catholic: Feast of Corpus Christi**
Celebrates the Eucharist, the body and blood of Jesus Christ.

July 2025

- **July 5 – Islamic: Ashura***
Marks the martyrdom of Husayn ibn Ali and is observed with mourning.
- **July 9 – Baha’i: Martyrdom of the Bab***
Commemorates the execution of the Baha’i co-founder.
- **July 23 – Rastafarian: Birthday of Haile Selassie***
Celebrates the birth of the Ethiopian Emperor, revered in Rastafarianism.
- **July 24 – Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints: Pioneer Day**
Commemorates the arrival of the first Mormon pioneers in Utah.

August 2025

- **August 1 – Pagan and Wiccan: Lughnasadh***
Celebrates the beginning of the harvest season.
- **August 15 – Roman Catholic: Feast of the Assumption**
Celebrates the assumption of the Virgin Mary into heaven.
- **August 16-17 – Hindu: Krishna Janmashtami**
Celebrates the birth of Lord Krishna.
- **August 21 – Jain: Paryushana begins**
Marks an important Jain festival focused on fasting and forgiveness.
- **August 27 – Hindu: Ganesh Chaturthi**
Celebrates the birth of Lord Ganesh.

September 2025

- **September 5 – Islamic: Mawlid al-Nabi***
Celebrates the birth of the Prophet Muhammad.
- **September 11 – Coptic Orthodox Christian: Nayrouz**
Marks the start of the Coptic New Year.
- **September 22 – Pagan and Wiccan: Mabon***
Celebrates the autumn equinox and the second harvest.
- **September 23-24 – Jewish: Rosh Hashanah***
The Jewish New Year, a time of reflection and renewal.
- **September 28-October 2 – Hindu: Durga Puja**
Celebrates the goddess Durga's victory over the buffalo demon Mahishasura.

October 2025

- **October 2 – Jewish: Yom Kippur***
The holiest day in Judaism, dedicated to atonement and repentance. This is one of the most important [Jewish high holy days](#).
- **October 7-13 – Jewish: Sukkot***
A week-long festival celebrating the fall harvest.
- **October 20 – Hindu: Diwali**
The festival of lights, celebrating the victory of light over darkness.
- **October 22 – Baha'i: Birthday of the Bab***
Celebrates the birth of the Baha'i co-founder.
- **October 31 – Pagan and Wiccan: Samhain***
Celebrates the end of the harvest and the beginning of winter.

November 2025

- **November 1 – Christian: All Saints' Day**
Honors all saints, known and unknown.
- **November 2 – Christian: All Souls' Day**
Commemorates all the faithful departed.
- **November 21 – Eastern Orthodox Christian: The Entrance of the Theotokos into the Temple**
Celebrates the presentation of Mary in the temple.

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- **November 24 – Sikh: Martyrdom of Guru Tegh Bahadur Sahib**
Honors the martyrdom of the ninth Sikh Guru.
 - **November 30 – Christian: Advent**
Marks the beginning of the Christian liturgical year leading up to Christmas.

December 2025

- **December 6 – Christian: Saint Nicholas Day**
Celebrates Saint Nicholas, the patron saint of children.
- **December 8 – Buddhist: Bodhi Day**
Commemorates the enlightenment of Buddha.
- **December 15-22 – Jewish: Hanukkah***
The Festival of Lights, celebrating the rededication of the Second Temple.
- **December 21 – Pagan and Wiccan: Yule***
Celebrates the winter solstice and the rebirth of the sun.
- **December 25 – Christian: Christmas**
Celebrates the birth of Jesus Christ.

Reminder: All holidays marked with * begin the prior evening.