

## **CHRISTIANITY**

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Christianity is the world's largest religion, with about 2.1 billion followers throughout the globe. Christianity is also the United States' biggest religion. Under the umbrella of Christianity, there are hundreds of denominations; about a quarter of all people in the U.S. identify with the Roman Catholic Christian denomination, while about half identify with one of the Protestant Christian denominations such as Baptist, Methodist, Lutheran or one of many others. Each denomination may have somewhat different practices, even though it shares beliefs common to most Christians.

Christians believe that there is only one god, but that there are three elements of God, including the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. They also believe that 2,000 years ago in what is now Israel, God sent his son, Jesus Christ, to earth to save humans from the consequences of their sins (wrongdoings in the eyes of God). Christians believe that Jesus gave his life by being crucified (nailed to a wood cross) and on the third day rose from the dead (was resurrected). The Christian holy book is called the Bible.

### **Some religious observances:**

#### **Christmas**

*Time of Year: December 25.* For Christians, Christmas is a holy day that marks the birth of Jesus, believed to be the son of God. Many non-Christians also observe with secular (non-religious) festivities. Although they differ around the world, some common ways of observing the holiday include attending worship services, hosting gatherings with family and friends, feasting and exchanging gifts.

Many decorate for the holiday using lights, Christmas (fir) trees, Nativity Scenes (displays depicting the birth of Jesus), and (commonly in the United States) images of Santa Claus, a character of legend who is believed to bring gifts to children.

#### **Easter**

*Time of Year: Usually April.* Easter commemorates the resurrection of Jesus Christ following Good Friday, the day of his crucifixion. Churches (Christian houses of worship) are filled with flowers, and people sing special hymns (religious songs).

Non-religious customs associated with the holiday include giving baskets of candy to children, with reference (commonly in the United States) to a character called the Easter Bunny. The holiday is often associated with celebrating the arrival of spring.

## **BUDDHISM**

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Most religions are defined by their beliefs. But in Buddhism, followers are discouraged from believing in doctrines (religious laws or rules) just because they read or are taught them. Instead, the historical Buddha (the religion's founder Siddhartha Gautama, who lived about 25 centuries ago in what is now Nepal and northeastern India) taught others how to realize truth for themselves.

Buddhism is a non-theistic religion, meaning that followers do not concern themselves with a personal-creator god present in faiths such as Christianity, Islam and Judaism. Buddhist practices are described in spiritual guides such as the Eightfold Path, which addresses wisdom, ethical behavior and mental discipline. Examples of practices include meditation, chanting and a belief in *karma* (a law of cause and effect set in motion by human actions and thoughts). Practices and beliefs can vary widely among Buddhists, however.

There are about 350 million practicing Buddhists, making Buddhism the fourth largest of the world's religions. Buddhism is most often practiced in Asian countries.

### **Some religious observances:**

#### **Vesak (Buddha Day)**

*Time of Year: Usually May, although celebration days differ depending upon the country.* On this day, Buddhists rededicate themselves to the Eightfold Path (guide to spiritual practices). Monks and nuns (men and women dedicated to a religious life) meditate and chant ancient rules. Others bring flowers and offerings to the temples, where they may also meditate and listen to talks. In the evenings, often there will be candlelight processions.

In some places, Buddhists celebrate with parties, parades and festivals. Temples and streets may be decorated with lanterns. Some Buddhists also "wash the baby Buddha." A small standing figure of the baby Buddha is put inside a basin on an altar. People fill a ladle with water or tea and pour it over the figure to "wash" the baby.

#### **Chunga Choepa (Butter Lamp Festival, Tibet)**

*Time of Year: Usually March.* This festival celebrates miracles performed by the historical Buddha. People display colorful butter sculptures and sing and dance into the night. Sculpting yak butter is an ancient Tibetan Buddhist art practiced by monks.

## **ISLAM**

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Islam is a major world religion, with over a billion followers worldwide. It is considered a monotheistic faith (one that believes in a single god), along with Judaism and Christianity.

The word "Islam" comes from an Arabic word meaning "peace" and "submission." Islam teaches that one can find peace in life by submitting to Almighty God (Allah) in heart, soul and deed. A person who follows Islam is called a Muslim.

The Prophet Muhammad is a central figure in Islam. He revealed the words of the Qur'an (holy book) and serves as an example for Muslims to follow. Although usually associated with the Arabs of the Middle East, less than 10% of Muslims are in fact Arab. Muslims are found all over the world.

### **Some religious observances:**

#### **Ramadan**

*Time of Year: Different every year, but typically begins in June, July or August.* Muslims who are physically able fast (do not eat) each day of the entire month of Ramadan, from sunrise to sunset. The evenings are spent enjoying family and community meals, engaging in prayer and spiritual reflection, and reading from the Qur'an (holy book). **Eid al-Fitr** (Breaking of the Fast) is celebrated at the end of the month of Ramadan.

#### **Hajj**

*Time of Year: Usually late November.* Every year, millions of Muslims from around the world make the journey to Makkah (Mecca), Saudi Arabia, for the annual pilgrimage (or Hajj). Pilgrims gather to perform rituals dating back to ancient times. Muslims are required to make the pilgrimage once in a lifetime, if they are physically and financially able.

When the pilgrims return to their home countries, they do so spiritually refreshed and forgiven of their sins (wrongdoings in God's eyes). After the completion of Hajj, Muslims around the world observe a special holiday called **Eid al-Adha** (the Festival of Sacrifice).

## **HINDUISM**

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Hinduism is considered the world's oldest religion (traced back to as early as 10,000 B.C.), and with a billion followers, is the world's third largest religion. Hinduism includes religious, philosophical and cultural ideas and practices that began in India.

Hindus believe that there is only one supreme being called "Brahman," and that thousands of Hindu gods and goddesses represent the many aspects of Brahman. Hindus also believe in reincarnation (rebirth), the law of cause and effect, and the importance of staying on the path of righteousness. The most popular sacred Hindu texts include the *Bhagavad Gita*, the *Upanishads* and the epics of *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*.

### **Some religious observances:**

#### **Diwali**

*Time of Year: October or November, depending on the cycle of the moon.* This five-day festival celebrates the start of the Hindu New Year. Known as the "Festival of Lights," the festivities feature fireworks, small clay lamps and candles. These lights represent the victory of good over evil, and brightness over darkness.

Diwali is actually celebrated in honor of Lord Rama and his wife Sita, who returned to their kingdom of Ayodhya following Rama's and the monkey god Hanuman's defeat of the demon King Ravana and rescue of Sita from his evil clutches. Special blessings are given to Laxshmi, the goddess of wealth and prosperity, and Ganesha, the remover of obstacles.

#### **Ganesh Chaturthi**

*Time of Year: Late August or early September, depending on the cycle of the moon.* The Ganesh Chaturthi festival lasts 11 days and honors the birth of the Hindu elephant-headed god, Lord Ganesha. Huge statues of Ganesha are installed in homes and on podiums. At the end of the festival, the statues are paraded through the streets and then submerged in the ocean.

## **TAOISM**

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Taoism (also spelled Daoism) is an organized religious tradition that has been developing in China, and elsewhere, for over 2,000 years. Its roots in China are believed to lie in the ancient traditions of shamans (people who were believed to have access to the spirit world). Today, Taoism has followers from a range of cultural and ethnic backgrounds.

Taoism followers aim to align with the patterns of the natural world by increasing their sensitivity to *qi* (*chi*), which they believe to be the life-force energy within all living things. Those who achieve this alignment are thought to be on a path to immortality and have the ability to gain health and happiness for themselves and

others. Taoist practices include special physical movements and using breath, attention, sound and/or visualization to activate flowing energy (*qi/chí*).

*Daode Jing (Tao Te Ching)* is Taoism's most famous scripture. Taoist beliefs are associated with the practices of meditation, yoga, Tai Chi and Kung Fu.

### **Some religious observances:**

#### **Tomb Sweeping Day**

*Time of Year: March or April.* This festival's purpose is: (1) celebrating the arrival of spring, and (2) honoring deceased ancestors. Families may go on outings, sing, dance or fly kites. Another popular ritual is coloring eggs, and then breaking them open to symbolize the opening of new life. Graves of ancestors are swept clean, and the plants growing around them are trimmed. Offerings such as food, tea, chopsticks and wine are presented. Many also burn symbolic joss paper—also called “spirit money,” as a way of asking for the relatives' continued guidance.

#### **Dragon Boat Festival (Duanwu Jie)**

*Time of Year: May.* This festival, also called “Poet's Day,” honors Qu Yuan, a poet and minister to the Zhou emperor who died in despair, having failed to prevent war between feudal states in ancient China. People mark the anniversary of his death with activities that include dragon boat races and the eating of *zong zi* (rice balls filled with egg, beans, fruits, walnuts, sweet potato, mushrooms and/or meat).

Dragon boats are long canoes made to look like dragons and which can be powered by up to 80 rowers. A popular festival activity—along with others believed to bring health and good luck—is creating pouches filled with herbs or spices believed to ward off disease.