

Descriptions of Religious Holy Day Observances

Asian Observances

Lunar New Year – One of the most important festivals celebrated in Asian cultures. In the West, Lunar New Year is often referred to as Chinese New Year. During this 15-day festival, family and friends travel across the nation to reunite over great food such as dumplings. People decorate houses with red lanterns, Spring couplets, and paper-cut outs. Young people love setting off firecrackers and receiving cash in paper (or electronic nowadays) red envelopes.

Mid-Autumn Day (also known as Moon Festival or Mooncake Festival) -- A traditional festival celebrated by many East and Southeast Asian people. The moon on this day is believed to be at its brightest and fullest size, coinciding with harvest time in the middle of Autumn. Family members gather to appreciate the moon while enjoying delicious mooncakes.

Water Festival – The New Year's celebration in several Southeast Asian countries. In some regions, dragon boat races are held and lanterns float on rivers to bring blessings. People splash water at one another in a boisterous cleansing ritual of good will.

Buddhist Holy Days

Bodhi Day - Observed by Mahayana Buddhist traditions, this Holy Day honors Buddha's achievement of enlightenment (Nirvana). Bodhi Day is commemorated on December 8th, and individuals spend the day meditating, studying the Dharma, chanting Buddhist texts (sutras), and performing kind acts.

Buddhist New Year – Buddhists celebrate the new year on various full moon days early in the Western calendar year: late January or early February in China, Korea, and Vietnam, a month later in Tibet, and April in Southeast Asia. Practices to mark the Buddhist New Year vary with geographical and cultural location, but often include families visiting temples together, conducting ceremonies at home, visiting friends and relatives, and exchanging presents.

Kathin - Month-long festival celebrated by Theravada Buddhists marking the end of a three-month retreat for monks. It is a time of giving to express gratitude to the Buddhist monks. Lay Buddhists bring donations, especially new robes to the temples for the monks. Countries where this is observed include Bangladesh, Cambodia, India, Laos, Malaysia, Myanmar, Sri Lanka and Thailand. Each culture may have their own specific practices and traditions.

Vesak (Buddha Day) – Celebrated every year on the full moon in May, this is the most significant Buddhist holiday. Theravada Buddhists commonly celebrate this day of the year on which (in different years) the Buddha was born, attained full awakening (enlightenment), and died over 2,500 years ago. Activities vary across Buddhist groups, but often include laypeople visiting a temple or monastery where they offer food to the monastics and to the poor, meditate, listen to the chanting of scriptures, and honor the Buddha with gifts of flowers and incense and food presented before images of the Buddha.

Christian Holy Days

Christmas – Observed on December 25th as a religious and cultural celebration commemorating the birth of Jesus. It is preceded by the season of Advent and initiates the season of Christmastide, which lasts twelve days. Orthodox Christians, who refer to this holy day as the Feast of the Nativity and the Incarnation of Christ, observe it on January 7 (Twelfth Night), the eve of Epiphany. Absence from work or school is common.

Ash Wednesday – Ash Wednesday marks the beginning of Lent, the 40-day liturgical season in which many Christians prepare through fasting, prayer, and penance for renewing baptismal promises at Easter. The 40-day period mirrors Jesus' 40-day fast and temptation in the wilderness.

Good/Holy Friday – A day commemorating the crucifixion and death of Jesus. Many Roman Catholics and Orthodox Christians observe it as a fast day. Christians of many denominations attend worship services. Absence from work or school is common.

Easter (also called **Pascha** & Resurrection Sunday) – A festival and cultural holiday celebrating the resurrection of Jesus from the dead. It is the culmination of "Holy Week" (Maundy Thursday, Good Friday), which Lent precedes. In Western Christianity, Easter Sunday marks the beginning of Eastertide, which lasts for seven weeks, ending the 50th day, Pentecost Sunday. In Eastern Christianity, the Paschal season begins on Pascha (Easter) and ends on the 40th day, the Feast of Ascension. Absence from work or school is common.

Hindu Holy Days

Diwali – A fall festival of lights signifying the victory of light over darkness, knowledge over ignorance, and hope over despair. Rituals of lighting candles and other forms of light extend over a five-day period, with the primary celebrations on the first night.

Holi – A spring festival of colors celebrating life and signifying the victory of good over evil. Participants frolic in parks or other open areas, chasing and covering each other with dry colored powder and water.

Jewish Holy Days

Rosh HaShanah – The Jewish New Year, which marks the beginning of a 10-day period of prayer, self-examination, and repentance known as the High Holy Days. Many Jews observe it with prayer and reflection in a synagogue. Absence from work or school is common on the first and second days of Rosh HaShanah.

Yom Kippur – The holiest day on the Jewish calendar, Yom Kippur means "Day of Atonement" and refers to the annual observance of fasting, prayer, and repentance. Absence from work or school is common.

Sukkot – Sukkot, meaning "booths" or "huts," is the seven-day festival of giving thanks for the fall harvest.

Hanukkah – Hanukkah (alternately spelled Chanukah) is the eight-day Festival of Lights commemorating the reconsecration of the Temple of Jerusalem in 165 B.C.E. after a group of Jewish rebels known as the Maccabees defeated the occupying Syrian army. Hanukkah is a minor holiday in terms of religious practice, but it is a special and joyous time of year.

Pesach/Passover – A major Jewish festival lasting seven days, Pesach (Passover in English) commemorates the Exodus of Jews from slavery in Egypt. The ritual observance of this holiday centers upon a home service called the seder (meaning "order") and a festive meal. Jews often attend ritual observances on the first, second, and final evenings.

Yom HaShoah – This solemn day serves as a memorial to those who died in the Holocaust. Shoah, which means catastrophe or utter destruction in Hebrew, refers to the atrocities committed against the Jewish people during World War II. It is also known as Holocaust Remembrance Day.

Shavuot – This festival marks the receiving of the Torah at Mount Sinai. It is a celebration of Torah, education, and actively choosing to participate in Jewish life.

Muslim Holy Days

Ramadhan – Ramadhan is the holiest month of the Islamic calendar and falls in the 9th month for a period of 28 to 30 days. During this month, Muslims fast from food and drink from dawn to sundown. Throughout the day Muslims abstain from eating food, drinking, smoking, lying, anger, gossip, bad language, and sexual intercourse. Muslims use this time to focus on prayer, reading the Qur'an, and increasing their spirituality and relationship with God.

Eid al-Fitr – This day marks the end of the holy month of Ramadan and the first day of the month of Shawwal. This is a day of celebration that begins with a special 'Eid prayer and involves day-long festivities involving food and sweets. Celebrations may last up to three days. Absence from work or school is common.

Eid al-Adha – The honoring and remembrance of Abraham's willingness to sacrifice his son, Ishmael to God. Muslims celebrate by starting their day with a special 'Eid prayer, a customary sacrifice of animals, sharing of the sacrificed animals' meat with family and the poor, and social gatherings. Celebrations may last up to three days. Absence from work or school is common.

Ashura – For Shi'a Muslims this is the tenth day of Muharram, during which time they commemorate the martyrdom of Husayn ibn 'Ali, the third Shi'ite Imam and grandson of Muhammad, observing the time by mourning his death. Shi'a Muslims spend Muharram going to the mosque in the evenings to retell the story of Karbala and honor Imam Husayn. Sunni Muslims commemorate God's freeing of the Israelites from slavery to the Pharaoh of Egypt by observing a fast. Absence from work or school is common.

Solstice Days

Winter Solstice - Occurs when the Earth's poles reach its maximum tilt away from the Sun leading to the shortest period of daylight and longest period of night. This has been seen as a significant time of year in many cultures being marked by festivals and rituals.

Summer Solstice - Marked by one of Earth's poles reaching its maximum tilt towards the Sun. This is the day with the longest period of daylight and shortest night period. It has been seen as a significant time of year in many cultures and is celebrated with festivals and rituals.