



London Inter Faith Centre

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Guidelines for Sharing Christian Festivals with those of Other Faiths or Religion.

This document is written to help guide any Christian institution (church, youth group or school) where there is engagement with people of other faiths.

Part 1: Festivals: A Time to Share

Festivals are when people of other faiths are most conscious of the Christian presence (especially around Easter and Christmas). For schools, youth groups and faith communities, this will be the impulse for visits to churches to “find out” about Christian practices or will initiate an invitation to church leaders and others to come into schools or community centres to explain these festivals.

Why Festivals are Important for Christians

It is worth reflecting why festivals are important for Christians. In general the festivals highlight the most important moments in the life of Jesus and in the history of the Church. They are not a chronological retelling of early Christian history, but rather an exploration of “what it means to be Christian” through the retelling of the central stories of Jesus’ earthly mission and the experiences of his early followers (disciples). They are times when Christians themselves are most aware of belonging to a faith community, and also of the depth of their individual relationship with God. They are times of learning and of deepening, and contribute to the nurturing of individual and communal faith.

Two Main Christian Festival Cycles

There are two main cycles; the first, the “Christmas” cycle which runs from the first Sunday of Advent (the first Sunday in November) to Epiphany (January 6th*); this cycle includes Advent, Christmas and Epiphany. The second, the “Easter cycle”, starts on Ash Wednesday (a movable date, between February 10th and March 9th) and ends with the feast of Pentecost (a movable date, between May 11th and June 12th). This cycle includes Lent, Holy Week (including Good Friday), Easter, Ascension and Pentecost.

**The dates given are the dates of these feasts followed by Roman Catholic and Protestant Christian denominations. Orthodox Christians follow a slightly different calendar and the dates will vary accordingly.*

There are also other important Christian festivals which are celebrated by many Christians. These include saints days, feasts associated with Mary, the mother of Jesus, Harvest (end of September/early October) and feasts associated with remembering the dead, namely All Saints/All Souls Days (the beginning of November).

Special Focus of Schools

Schools will have their own needs and interests reflecting both their ethos and their syllabi. For example any student studying Christianity for GCSE will need to know about the practice, the meaning (in Jesus' life and in the life of faith of the individual) and the consequences in terms of developing a life of faith. It is always worth checking with the teacher/coordinator organising the visit what exactly best serves the needs of the students.

Part 2: What are the Core Christian Beliefs which explain the Celebration of Festivals?

Sharing our Beliefs with People of Other Faiths or Religion:

In any exchange with a group or individual from another world faith, it is important to be as confident (without seeking to preach or proselytise) and as clear as possible about our own Christian beliefs.

Some of the theological ideas expressed through the Festivals will not have parallels in other world faiths. So we may ask the question "What is "particular" about the Christian faith?" The idea of God as Trinity (although there may be some parallels in Hinduism), The idea of a beginning and end (time as seen in the Abrahamic religion, but not in the Eastern faiths where time is experienced as cyclical), Incarnation (God become human); the concept of Salvation, and the belief that the Son of God died on the Cross and then rose from the dead at Easter, are some of the fundamental assumptions lying behind the celebration of Christmas, Easter and Pentecost. These are concepts and beliefs which those of other world faiths may find difficult to grasp. At the same time we need to be aware of the sensitivities of others to the Christian character of these festivals and the "evangelical opportunities" that they might be seen to be presenting.

Statements of Christian Beliefs

There are statements available of Christian beliefs written with other faiths in mind. On the London Inter Faith Centre's website there is a document "*The World through Christian Eyes*", which is the result of a two year project involving Christian clergy of the Church of England, from a range of theological backgrounds, presenting to other faiths core Christian beliefs.

A summary is produced below in appendix 1.

Part 3: How to Share Our Festivals: Worship

Introduction

Inviting others to experience our festivals provides us with an opportunity to share our faith in an interesting and colourful way. Although the beliefs which lie behind the celebration are fundamental for Christians in their understanding of the significance of that festival, the focus in sharing them with others will be the religious experience in terms of what happens in the worship, and the demonstration of what it means to celebrate these festivals. Language and creeds can divide us; whereas a focus on the stories, sights and sounds of our festivals can resonate with the life experiences of our religious neighbours. It is worth reflecting that in the life of the church worship came before the creeds.

Ritual

The ritual of our festivals involves the whole body; eyes, ears, touch, smell and movement. The celebration of Christian festivals are enacted through the use of the drama of ritual, and the signs and symbols of church worship. Whenever the students from our local Islamic schools visit St Anne's to learn about Christmas and Easter we try to show as many of the symbols as possible, the colour of the vestments, the use of candles, the ringing of bells, the lighting of incense, the sprinkling of Holy Water, the special artefacts and religious objects associated with the particular festival being celebrated. Those sights and sounds may be unusual to some religious groups and completely outside their experience, but they will resonate with those who come

from religions which place an emphasis on similar practice: i.e. Hindus, Jains, Shiite Muslims, and Mahayana Buddhists. The use of these objects in ritual also provides an opportunity to explain their significance in terms of worship and the life of faith

Story

All the festivals are linked with specific Biblical stories about the life of Jesus and of the church. All religions have their stories, and the festivals provide an opportunity for imaginative storytelling.

Other features: The Role of the Minister, Communal and Individual Behaviour, and Links with the Seasonal Cycle.

The role of the priest or minister in such ritual will have parallels with those religions in which the cleric has a special and important status in terms of religious ritual.

The festivals are associated in Christian practice with the practices of fasting, giving to charity and helping in the community (good works). They are also times when individual Christians might adopt special prayerful practices or study of scripture. Again these have parallels with the practice of other religions, and also can lead to cooperation between different religious communities.

Both Christmas and Easter are closely linked with the annual seasonal cycle and with the cycle of nature. Again there are parallels in other world faiths as demonstrated by the practice of some civic authorities to unite festivals under the single label of "winter festivals".

School Syllabus

(For Schools) The RE syllabus requires knowledge of the Christian faith, rituals and festivals, depending on the age of the students. It is important to check with the teacher or RE coordinator what is required in the syllabus. Students respond well to being shown religious artefacts with their use explained (vestments, holy images, altar or communion table, communion vessels, Bibles, liturgy book, hymn books, hymn board, bells, baptismal font, pulpit and lectern). The students will also respond well to stories from the Bible. It is also helpful if some awareness of the differences in beliefs between Christianity and the faith of the students is shown.

Part 4: How to Share Our Festivals: Their Meaning

Introduction

The Christian teaching which lies behind these festivals often resonates with the beliefs and practices of other faiths. Of course there needs to be care not to assume that we are comparing like with like. For example the Christian idea of a prophet which, within a Christian framework encompasses a looking forward to Christ, is seen as different from the use of the same term by Muslims for the Prophet Muhammed. Or, another example, the Hindu understanding of Jesus as an avatar, an incarnation of Brahman, but one among many, differs from the Christian understanding of Jesus as the incarnate Son of God. That said, we will find ideas which will have echoes or parallels within other faiths.

It is also well to be aware that some of the core Christian beliefs represented in these festivals are specifically not accepted in other religions, especially in Islam and Judaism. So although Muslims believe in Jesus (Isa) as a special prophet, and Mary (Maryam) as his mother, they deny that Jesus was divine and also that Jesus died on the Cross. Jews, too, cannot accept Jesus as the Messiah or as divine.

In this section there will be a general introduction to the festival, and then a list of themes which may touch similar themes in other religions.

Advent, Christmas and Epiphany

Advent

The first cycle of festivals begins with the season of **Advent**. For Christians, Advent is a time of expectation and preparation, looking forward to the promise of a Messiah or Saviour figure as suggested by interpretation of some passages in the Old Testament (The Christian version of the Jewish scriptures). Advent is a season of mood not about celebration, but rather one of waiting in expectation and hope for the Messiah to come. "O Come, O Come Emmanuel" is the title of a famous Advent hymn; Emmanuel means "God with us".

Traditionally Advent was a season of fasting and abstinence. It is a season associated with reflection on one's tendency to do things wrong and with asking God for forgiveness. It is a season of reflecting on one's own limitations as a human being, and on the vision of an approaching Day of Judgement or Day of the Lord. But as we move towards Christmas there is the theme of hope that God does not abandon his people, but rather acts to restore them to a right relationship with him. In a time of gloom and darkness, there is the hope of God's light coming into the world.

Theological Themes of Advent

- Waiting in expectation
- Preparation
- Fasting (All Religions)
- Reflection on wrongdoing and Repentance (Islam/Judaism)
- Human nature (All religions)
- Moral Choices (All religions)
- Need for God; waiting on God (Islam/Judaism)
- Prophecy (Islam/Judaism)
- The End Time (Islam/Judaism)
- Mary, Mother of Jesus (Islam)
- Light and darkness (Seasonal: parallels with Diwali, Hanukah)

Christmas

Christmas is a time of joy and celebration that God has sent his Son in the form of a child, born to the Virgin Mary, in a stable in Bethlehem. God takes on human form; in the words of the Gospel writer John, "The Word became flesh and dwelt amongst us". This is a cause of great celebration for Christians for as the angels proclaim to shepherds in fields near Bethlehem, "tonight a saviour is born" This child is destined to become Jesus the prophet, teacher and king who has been sent by God to proclaim God's love for all humankind. It is also a time to reflect that this child is born not in a palace amongst those who are famous or great, but rather amongst the poor and downtrodden. God is concerned with the well-being of all human beings. Christmas is a time to give presents as a demonstration of love for one's friends and neighbours and also a time for charitable giving.

The present-giving is also associated with the feast of the **Epiphany**, when Christians remember how wise men (sometimes portrayed on Christmas cards as kings) came from the East, guided by a star, to honour homage this new born king. They gave gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh to the child.

Epiphany

Epiphany is one of the oldest Christian feasts.. It means "manifestation" or "showing forth". It is also called Theophany ("manifestation of God"), especially by Eastern Christians. A theme of this season is the light of God which comes into the darkness of the world to guide us on our way.

Epiphany commemorates the first two occasions on which Jesus' divinity, according to Christian belief, was made known (manifested): when the three wise men visited the infant Jesus in Bethlehem, and when John the Baptist baptised him in the River Jordan.

One other theme which is picked up in the Epiphany story is the threat from Herod, an evil ruler, to Jesus' well-being. This is a theme which is played out again and again in human history.

Theological Themes of Christmas and Epiphany

- Incarnation [God becoming human] (some parallels in Hinduism)
- Birth of a prophet (Islam/Judaism)
- Birthdays of religious leaders (Sikhism/Buddhism,)
- Mary, Mother of Jesus (Islam)
- Angels (Islam/Judaism)
- Stories (all Religions)
- Good ruler versus Evil ruler
- Revelation (Islam/Judaism)
- Peace and Justice (all Religions)
- Light and darkness (Seasonal)
- Generosity and Love (all religions)
- Gifts and Offerings (all religions)
- The idea of grace (Judaism, Islam, but not Buddhism or Eastern religions)
- New Year and Hope (seasonal)
- Spiritual journey (journey of the magi)

Lent, Holy Week, Easter, Ascension, Pentecost

The second cycle of festivals is associated with Jesus' death on the Cross, his resurrection (rising from the Dead), his ascension into heaven and the birth of the Church with the coming of the Holy Spirit (Pentecost).

This cycle begins on **Ash Wednesday**, which marks the beginning of Lent. Ash Wednesday is a day of penitence, fasting and abstinence, a day to reflect on the inevitability of death and the need to refocus on God. On this day Christians have their foreheads marked with ash in the sign of a cross.

Ash Wednesday is preceded by **Shrove Tuesday**, a day when traditionally Christians confessed their sins to a priest and asked for forgiveness or absolution (shriving). Shrove Tuesday is now better known as Pancake Day. This name came from a tradition of eating up and feasting on all the foods which people avoided eating during Lent.

Ash Wednesday sets the tone for the forty days of **Lent**, a period set aside for spiritual reflection and spiritual discipline and renewal, with an emphasis on study of the Bible, fasting and charity. As the season proceeds so the focus moves to anticipating the story of Jesus' suffering and death. For Christians the Cross is central to their religious or spiritual experience, which is therefore the focus of individual and communal reflection. This comes to the fore in the final week of Lent known as Holy Week.

Holy Week begins with **Palm Sunday** when Christians remember the time when Jesus entered Jerusalem riding on a donkey as a symbol of peace and humility. Christians proclaim Jesus as their king carrying palm crosses in procession, thus beginning a journey which will end with Jesus' death on the cross.

The next important day is **Maundy Thursday** when Christians recall Jesus' last meal with his disciples (his followers). This is known as the Last Supper. During the service held on this day Christians recall Jesus' example of loving service when he washed the feet of the disciples, they recall his command to "love" and they also remember the sacrifice he made by dying on the Cross.

The following day is **Good Friday**, for Christians the most solemn day of the year, the day when Christians remember that Jesus was arrested, put on trial and then put to death like a common criminal on the cross. It is a day of deep sorrow and the focus is very much on the meaning of Jesus' death.

The Christian scriptures say that three days later Jesus rose from the dead. This is commemorated on **Easter Sunday**, a day of great celebration for Christians, with an emphasis on the experience that Jesus is not dead but alive. Easter Day in the West occurs in the season of spring and there are a lot of references to new life in the liturgy. It is a day when God's promise and gift to humankind is celebrated by Christians, a day when hope overcomes despair, light overcomes darkness, and good defeats evil.

This period of celebration lasts forty days until to the feast of the **Ascension** when Christians recall the account of Jesus' ascent into heaven as told in scriptures. Ten days later Christians celebrate the feast of **Pentecost**, recalling the gift of the Holy Spirit to the Disciples and the part the Holy Spirit plays in the building and renewal of the Christian community (The Church). Christians believe that the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of God, the Spirit of Christ, empowers human beings to do good in the world, and enables them to bring about God's rule on earth, a rule of justice and peace.

Theological Themes: Lent

- Fasting (All religions)
- Reflections on wrongdoing and Repentance (Islam/Judaism)
- Right Actions (All religions)
- Spiritual Discipline (All religions)
- Refocusing (All religions)
- Palm Sunday: Jesus as King
- Maundy Thursday:
- The Teaching of Christ on love
- Example of service (All religions)
- Good Friday:
- Personal Sacrifice (All religions)
- Integrity
- Persecution (Bahai, Shiites)
- Punishment
- Compassion and Love
- Betrayal and Despair
- Trust in God (Judaism/Islam)
- The path of the disciple (The path of Christ, or the Buddha)
- Passover (Judaism)

Theological Themes: Easter

- Easter Sunday:
- Spring (All religions)
- New life (All religions)
- Rebirth (Buddhism/Hinduism)
- Joy and Hope
- Glorification (Enlightenment of the Buddha/Hinduism)
- Fulfilment of promise
- Transformation (Hinduism/Buddhism)
- The Glory of God

Theological Themes: Pentecost

- Discipleship and followers (All religions)
- Commitment (All religions)

- Spiritual guidance (All religions)
- The role of the church
- The fruits of the spirit
- The gifts of the Spirit
- The spiritual life (All religions)
- The universal church/ The people of God (The Ummah in Islam /The people of God in Judaism)

Appendix 1

*Christians are monotheist; they believe in God as **Trinity**, Father (**Creator**) Son (**Redeemer**) and Holy Spirit (**Sustainer**), unified as one. Our purpose as human beings is to have a full relationship with God and to live out our lives in full understanding of being made in the Image of God (**holiness**). Human beings have been given **free will** and as a consequence often make wrong choices which causes unhappiness and suffering for others (**human sinfulness**). Christian understanding goes back to the moment of creation (**Original Sin and the doctrine of the Fall**) Because of our sinfulness we fall out of a relationship with God, and this creates our need for **redemption**.*

*The Christmas cycle of festivals focuses on God's decision to send his Son to the world as the **Messiah or Redeemer**, to restore human relationship to its rightful state. God out of love for all of creation sends his Son Jesus, the living Word, to call the world to repent of their sins and to ask for forgiveness. He also through his actions and teachings inaugurates the rule of God (**the Kingdom of God**), when justice and peace reigns. Christians believe that in Jesus, God became human (**Incarnation**), and his birth is celebrated on Christmas Day.*

*However Jesus' message was rejected by some and this led to Jesus being arrested, put on trial and then put to death on the Cross (**The Crucifixion**) This is commemorated in the second cycle; Jesus' death on the Cross is remembered on Good Friday. Three days later according to Christian belief, Jesus rose from the dead (**The Resurrection**). This is remembered on Easter Sunday. Christians believe that through the resurrection, Jesus' radical path of uncompromising love amid misunderstanding and rejection was vindicated. By his death and resurrection, life overcomes death, good defeats evil, and human beings are able to have their relationship with God fully restored.*

*The resurrection experience lies at the heart of Christian faith, and led to the formation of the Christian church by the early followers (**disciples**) of the Way of Jesus. Jesus' disciples claimed Jesus as the Messiah and the Son of God. They began the work of calling all people to receive God's forgiveness and the gift of a new life by turning from sin and putting their faith and trust in Jesus Christ. With the coming of the **Holy Spirit** at the festival of **Pentecost** the first Christians experienced the presence of God and the abiding power of the risen Christ in a personal way. Through the Spirit this experience is promised to all Christians.*

*Pentecost is therefore regarded as the birthday of the Christian **Church**, the community of those who belong to Jesus Christ. Christians seek to model their lives on Jesus' teaching and example of generosity, purity, justice and forgiveness. Thus the purpose of Christian life, within the community of the Church, is to live and share Christ's self-giving love. In the Lord's Prayer Jesus taught his followers to pray to God as Father, seeking his help and living in daily relationship with him. By the power of the Holy Spirit and through the guidance of the Church, Christians seek to discern God's ways and to work thereby for the fulfilment of God's kingdom of justice and peace. They believe this will not be completed until Christ returns as judge to renew all of creation. As Christians proclaim, "Christ has died, Christ is risen, Christ will come again."*