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Christian Holidays: Fact Sheet

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Introduction

Christianity is one of the three major Abrahamic faiths, alongside Islam and Judaism. According to the Pew Research Center, approximately 65% of Americans self-identify as Christian.¹ There are a large number of Christian traditions, with great variation in which holidays are celebrated and how.

This fact sheet highlights two holidays—Easter and Christmas—observed by a significant portion of Christian American denominations and addresses the ways these holidays are currently recognized in the United States.

This fact sheet is designed to assist congressional offices with work related to Christian holidays. It contains sample speeches and remarks from the *Congressional Record*, presidential statements and remarks, and selected historical and cultural resources.

This is part of a series of Congressional Research Service fact sheets on religious holidays in the United States.

Major Holidays and Observances

With the exception of Christmas, the official government observance of most Christian holidays is determined at the state or local level.

Internationally, many countries celebrate these and other Christian feasts and liturgical days at the national level. Parliaments, banks, schools, and other institutions may be closed on these days.

Easter

Easter commemorates the resurrection of Jesus Christ and is the oldest annual Christian holiday or feast.² The holiday is often observed by a special church service, followed by a family or community gathering that involves a special meal. Many Christians also include in their celebrations processions or parades; egg dyeing, rolling, and hunts; and sweets gifting.³

Easter does not occur on the same date each year. It is observed the first Sunday following the first full moon on or after March 21. Some Eastern Orthodox traditions use the Julian calendar to calculate the date of Easter, instead of the Gregorian calendar. This means in some years Easter falls on the same date for both and in other years there can be as many as five weeks' difference.

State and local governments do not typically observe Easter as an official holiday, although some do recognize other days related to Easter with early or all-day closings. For example, state offices are closed on the Friday before Easter in Connecticut, Delaware, Hawaii, Indiana, Kentucky (for half the day), Louisiana, New Jersey, North Carolina, North Dakota, and Tennessee.

¹ Gregory Smith et al., *In U.S., Decline of Christianity Continues at Rapid Pace: An Update on America's Changing Religious Landscape*, Pew Research Center, October 17, 2019, p. 3, at <https://www.pewforum.org/2019/10/17/in-u-s-decline-of-christianity-continues-at-rapid-pace/>.

² "Easter," in *A Dictionary of Comparative Religion*, ed. S. G. F. Brandon (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1970), p. 252.

³ Christian Roy, "Easter (Christianity)," in *Traditional Festivals: A Multicultural Encyclopedia*, vol. 1 (Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-CLIO, 2005), pp. 121-128.

Christmas

Christmas commemorates the birth of Jesus Christ. The holiday is often observed by special church services and community-wide activities, such as caroling. Although the celebration of Christmas varies greatly the world over, some common elements in the United States are Christmas plays or pageants, decorating and displaying Christmas trees, and gift giving.⁴

Christmas is always observed on December 25. Some Eastern Orthodox traditions use the Julian calendar and, due to the differences between the Julian and Gregorian calendars, celebrate Christmas on the Gregorian date January 7. This date was chosen sometime in the fourth century A.D. and is generally considered to have been chosen to supersede non-Christian holidays commonly celebrated at the same time of year.⁵

Christmas is a federal holiday. It was one of the first four holidays established by federal legislation.⁶ When the original legislation was signed into law in 1870, it was an unpaid holiday exclusively for federal employees in the District of Columbia. The push for this legislation was led mainly by commercial interests that “wanted certain holidays to be formalized.”⁷

Occasionally, Presidents have issued executive orders closing all executive branch departments and agencies of the federal government on the day immediately preceding or following Christmas.

Congressional Recognition

Some Members of Congress make floor statements, issue press releases, or enter Extensions of Remarks into the *Congressional Record* to recognize federal holidays and observances. The following are examples that may be of assistance in preparing such statements:

Representative Martha Roby, “Easter Brings an Abundance of Hope,” press release, April 10, 2020.

Senator Joe Manchin, “Manchin Wishes West Virginians a Merry Christmas and Happy Holidays,” press release, December 24, 2019.

Representative Ted Poe, “WWI Christmas,” Extensions of Remarks, *Congressional Record*, daily edition, vol. 163 (December 20, 2017), p. E1734.

Representative Doug LaMalfa, “A Christmas Greeting,” remarks in the House, *Congressional Record*, daily edition, vol. 162 (December 8, 2016), p. H7554.

Representative Louie Gohmert, “An Easter Prayer,” remarks in the House, *Congressional Record*, daily edition, vol. 158 (March 29, 2012), p. H1796.

Senator Robert C. Byrd, “Springtime and Easter,” remarks in the Senate, *Congressional Record*, daily edition, vol. 154, part 2 (March 13, 2008), p. S2119.

⁴ Christian Roy, “Christmas (Christianity),” in *Traditional Festivals: A Multicultural Encyclopedia*, vol. 1 (Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-CLIO, 2005), pp. 61-72.

⁵ “Christmas,” in *A Dictionary of Comparative Religion*, ed. S. G. F. Brandon (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1970), p. 195.

⁶ CRS Report R41990, *Federal Holidays: Evolution and Current Practices*, by Jacob R. Straus.

⁷ Olivia B. Waxman, “The Surprising Story of Christmas in the United States,” *Time*, December 23, 2016.

Presidential Recognition

From the lighting of the National Christmas Tree to the White House Easter Egg Roll, many Presidents have made remarks in relation to Christian holiday celebrations held at the White House. They have also issued statements recognizing the observance of Christian holidays. Some recent examples include

Presidential addresses and remarks—Joseph R. Biden, Jr. (2021-)

Presidential addresses and remarks—Donald J. Trump (2017-2021)

Presidential addresses and remarks—Barack Obama (2009-2017)

Presidential addresses and remarks—George W. Bush (2001-2009)

Presidential addresses and remarks—William J. Clinton (1993-2001)

Presidential proclamations and remarks from 1993 to the present are available through the govinfo service on the Government Publishing Office website. Earlier remarks (including selected audio and video clips) are available through The American Presidency Project, established by the University of California, Santa Barbara.

Historical and Cultural Resources

Numerous resources provide information on the history and culture of Christian holidays. Some of these include the following:

Library of Congress, “Easter Week Illuminations.” This blog post talks about several representations of Easter Week in the Library’s collection.

Library of Congress, “Highlighting the Holidays.” This series of blog posts discusses particular holiday symbols and traditions, mainly relating to Christmas. Additional blog posts can be found by searching for “Christmas” in the search box.

Library of Congress, “National Jukebox: Christmas.” This search returns all of the Christmas music hosted by the Library’s National Jukebox project.

Smithsonian, “Religion in Early America.” This website is for an exhibit at the National Museum of American History that shows 18th and 19th century religious practices in the United States.

U.S. House of Representatives, “The Annual Easter Egg Roll at the Capitol.” Highlights congressional involvement in the evolution of the annual Easter Egg Roll.

U.S. House of Representatives, “The Origins of the Capitol Christmas Tree.” Short overview of the history of the Capitol Christmas Tree.

The Library of Congress Prints and Photographs section has many images of people celebrating Christmas and Easter in its online catalog.

Related CRS Reports

CRS Report R41990, *Federal Holidays: Evolution and Current Practices*, by Jacob R. Straus

CRS Report R43539, *Commemorations in Congress: Options for Honoring Individuals, Groups, and Events*, coordinated by Jacob R. Straus

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