



Briefing note: **Christianity**

Beliefs

Christianity is the most popular religion in the world with over 2 billion adherents. 42 million Britons see themselves as nominally Christian, and there are 6 million who are actively practising.

Christians believe that Jesus was the Messiah promised in the Old Testament, that Jesus Christ is the Son of God and that God sent his Son to earth to save humanity from the consequences of its sins.

One of the most important concepts in Christianity is that of Jesus giving his life on the Cross (the Crucifixion) and rising from the dead on the third day (the Resurrection). Christians believe that there is only one God, but that there are three elements to this one God:

- God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit

Christianity is divided into four principal families: Orthodox, Protestant, Roman Catholics and Independent or Pentecostal.

Christians believe that there is a life after earthly death. While the actual nature of this life is not known, Christians believe that many spiritual experiences in this life help to give them some idea of what eternal life will be like.

The Saints

These days, the word saint is most commonly used to refer to a Christian who has lived a particularly good and holy life on earth, and with whom miracles are claimed to have been associated after their death.

Texts

The Christian holy book is the Bible, which contains the 39 books of the Old Testament and the 27 books of the New Testament. Whilst Christians, Jews and Muslims share belief in the Old Testament, the New Testament is exclusive to Christians as the teachings of Jesus and a history of the early Christian Church.

Symbols

The main Christian symbol is the cross, in memory of the crucifixion of Christ. The symbols of the Pentecost are those of the Holy Spirit consisting of flames, wind, the breath of God and a dove.

Food, drink and fasting

Some Christians do not eat meat on Fridays and some will abstain from food and drink before taking Holy Communion. Many people observe some form of fasting during Lent (the 40 days preparation for Easter).



Places of worship and pilgrimage

Christians worship in a church. The word church comes from the Greek Ekklesia in the New Testament; this means an assembly, where Jesus' followers come together to worship. The Church is sometimes called the 'body of Christ' - this means that the people are the church, not the building where they meet. The spiritual leaders are called priests or ministers. Christian worship involves praising God in music and speech, readings from scripture, prayers of various sorts, a sermon, and various holy ceremonies (often called sacraments) such as the Eucharist.

Places which are special for Christians are linked with the life of Jesus or the Saints and Christians will often journey to them on pilgrimages. Christian pilgrims still journey to the Holy Land and walk along the Via Dolorosa: the route Jesus walked to the cross. Christians also pray in the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, the site of the tomb where Jesus' body was placed. To Christians, pilgrimages are adventures involving a journey to places where God's presence has been particularly sensed and where people can be free of worry. Pilgrimages can be occasions where there is a party spirit: a sense of celebration and joy as well as more serious moments.

Festivals and days of worship

Easter, not Christmas is the most important part of the Christian year and the holiest of all days is Good Friday when Jesus' death is commemorated and Easter Sunday when his resurrection from the dead is celebrated. The day before Good Friday is Holy Thursday when Jesus' Last Supper with his twelve Apostles is remembered. Easter Sunday can fall anywhere between March 22nd and April 25th.

Pentecost is a celebration of the sending of the Holy Spirit to the Church. It is celebrated on the Sunday 50 days after Easter. This event is regarded as the birthday of the Christian Church and the start of the church's mission to the world.

December 25th celebrates the birth of Jesus in Bethlehem and is the most widely known and celebrated Christian feast.

Q For further information on faith dates and religious festivals follow this link: <http://www.equality.leeds.ac.uk/for-staff/good-practice-guidance/faith-calendar-and-dates-of-religious-festivals/>

*This briefing note was produced using information found in the 'Faith Communities Navigator' published in 2007 by the Faith Regen Foundation. Further information about the Foundation is available by following this link <http://www.thefrf.org/work/archive>.

QWe have also used information taken from the BBC Religion website; follow the link for further information <http://www.bbc.co.uk/religion/>

