

### Christian Identities

Followers of the teachings of Jesus Christ are called Christians. Australia operates within a dominant Christian framework. However, while many staff and students accept Christian values, many are not church attendees. The intention of this General Information Folio is to explain some aspects of Christianity that may not be apparent to all.

## Christians in Australia

- The history of Christianity in Australia began with the Christian Chaplains aboard the first fleet. The Europeans, who migrated in the 1800s, brought their own faiths to Australia. These faiths included Anglican (known at the time as The Church of England), Methodist, Roman Catholic, Presbyterian, Congregationalist, Lutheran and Baptist churches.
- By 1901, approximately 40% of the population was Anglican, 23% Roman Catholic and 34% other Christian. About 1% followed other religions.
- The profile of Australian religious affiliations has since diversified, largely due to waves of migration that have taken place in the following decades.
- Following World War Two, the impact of migration from Europe led to increases in followers of the Orthodox churches. The Greek, Macedonian, Serbian and Russian Orthodox Churches have significant numbers in Australia.
- Christianity remains the dominant religion in Australia. According to the 2001 Census, almost 12.8 million people said they were Christians, with Roman Catholics making up 27%, Anglicans 21% and other Christians 21%. In the 2006 Census 64% of the total population identified as Christian.
- As the dominant religion in Australia, holiday periods usually follow significant Christian dates such as Easter and Christmas.

## About Christianity

The major source of faith and practice for Christians is the Bible which is comprised of the Old Testament (the Jewish Scriptures which were written before Jesus came) and the New Testament (written by the first followers of Jesus after his resurrection).

For Christians, the central message is that God loves the whole world and this love is demonstrated in the life, death and resurrection of God's Son, Jesus. Jesus' death and resurrection provides forgiveness of sins for those who put their trust in him. People are commanded to love their fellow humans as themselves.

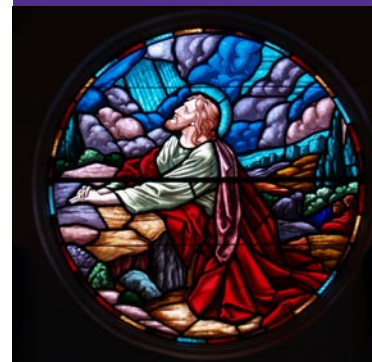
Jesus was a Jew and early Christianity was originally considered a Jewish sect.

The main denominations within Christianity include:

### Roman Catholicism

The primacy and authority of the Pope is a characteristic feature of the Roman Catholic Church. His authority is ascribed by unbroken apostolic succession from St Peter, one of the first apostles. (The Eastern Orthodox and some other churches also consider themselves "apostolic" in origin.) Until the Middle Ages, Catholicism dominated in Europe. Roman Catholic clergy are always male and are not permitted to marry.

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## Eastern Orthodox Church

In the 5th century governance of the church split into western and eastern components, the Roman Catholic in the west and the Eastern Orthodox in the east. Originating from the Byzantine Empire, the Eastern Orthodox Church is not a single church but rather a group of self-governing bodies each associated with a particular country. Common Orthodox nations include Russia, Greece, Serbia, Romania, Bulgaria, the Ukraine and Armenia.

Most Eastern Orthodox religions follow the teachings of Saint Basil. Three characteristic features of Eastern Orthodox religion are liturgical worship, fasting and the reverence of icons in both public and private worship.

Parish priests are expected to be married. Bishops are not permitted to marry.

## Oriental Orthodox Churches

Oriental Orthodox Churches are distinct from the Eastern Orthodox Church. During the 5th century, Oriental Orthodox Churches split from the Roman Catholic Church after ritual and doctrinal differences.

Examples of Oriental Orthodox Christianity include the Coptic Orthodox Church of Alexandria in Egypt, the Armenian Apostolic Church, the Indian Orthodox Church, the Eritrean Orthodox Church and the Syriac Orthodox Church.

## Protestantism

Challenging Roman Catholic teaching on the relationship between faith and works in obtaining salvation, the availability of the Bible in local languages and the authority of the Pope, the Protestant branch of Christianity split from

Roman Catholicism during the Reformation in the 16th and 17th centuries. Protestants eventually divided into many denominations as a result of disputes over doctrine, theology or religious practice.

Some of the larger denominations include Anglican, Lutheran, Salvation Army, Seventh Day Adventist, Pentecostal and Baptist. In the 1970s, the Methodist, Congregational, and some Presbyterian churches in Australia united to form the Uniting Church in Australia.

Protestant clergy are permitted to marry. Women can act as clergy in some denominations.

Faiths distinguishing themselves from the Catholic, Orthodox and Protestant Churches.

There are a number of other faith communities that refer to themselves as Christian but differ from traditional Christian teaching about who Jesus is and what his death and resurrection achieved. There is some debate about whether these faiths are truly Christian. Part of this debate is around the acceptance of the Nicene Creed, which is recognized by the major streams within Christianity.

## The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints (LDS)/Mormons

Founded in 1830 by an American called Joseph Smith, the LDS Church regards itself as restoring the Church of Christ to its true form, as it existed in the times of the Apostles. Individual members of the church are often referred to as Mormons. Young men who are physically and mentally fit are required to serve as missionaries. Unlike the Catholic, Orthodox and Protestant churches, LDS followers believe that worship should be held on Saturday. Mormons abstain from two consecutive meals on the first Sunday of each month. They also abstain from alcohol, tea and coffee and tobacco products.

## Jehovah's Witness

Jehovah's Witnesses believe that the traditional Christian Churches have deviated from the true teachings of the Bible. While they see the Bible as the main way in which God communicates his will to human beings they have their own translation of the bible known as the New World Translation of the Holy Scriptures.

Jehovah's Witnesses are also trained to work as part-time missionaries for the rest of their lives. Missionary work involves visiting people in their homes and discussing the scriptures in the hope of converting non-believers, and distributing magazines such as The Watchtower (the primary bible study aid) and Awake.

Jehovah's Witnesses avoid eating blood or blood products.

# Christian Religious Observance

## Place and style of worship

A church building is the place of Christian worship although Christians can worship God anywhere. Worship at a church involves prayer, singing of hymns and listening to the Bible read and taught. Holy Communion, characteristic of most Christian Churches, is a ceremony of remembrance of the self-giving death of Christ. Some Christian denominations require confession of sins to be completed before Communion.

Christian church services in Australia are usually on Sunday, but may take place on other days as well.

## Christian symbols

Christian symbols include the crucifix which depicts an image of Jesus crucified on the cross, and a cross without the figure of Jesus symbolising his Resurrection.

## Religious text

Most Christians follow the teachings of the Bible, which is also called the Holy Bible, Scriptures or Word of God.

## Christian dress code

Western and Orthodox Christianity do not prescribe a dress code for lay Christians. People attending a place of worship would generally dress modestly.

## Dietary requirements and restrictions

Some Christian denominations require the abstinence from some or all foods for a period of time (fasting). Fasting is considered by some Christian denominations as a way of improving one's self-discipline and appreciating the sufferings of the poor.

# Significant Religious Dates and Events

While different Christian denominations celebrate and observe different holy days, most denominations observe the following feast or holy days:

## Christmas Day

Christmas Day marks the birth of Jesus Christ and is celebrated with church ceremonies, carols and the exchange of gifts amongst family and friends, some of which are attributed to Father Christmas/Santa Claus.

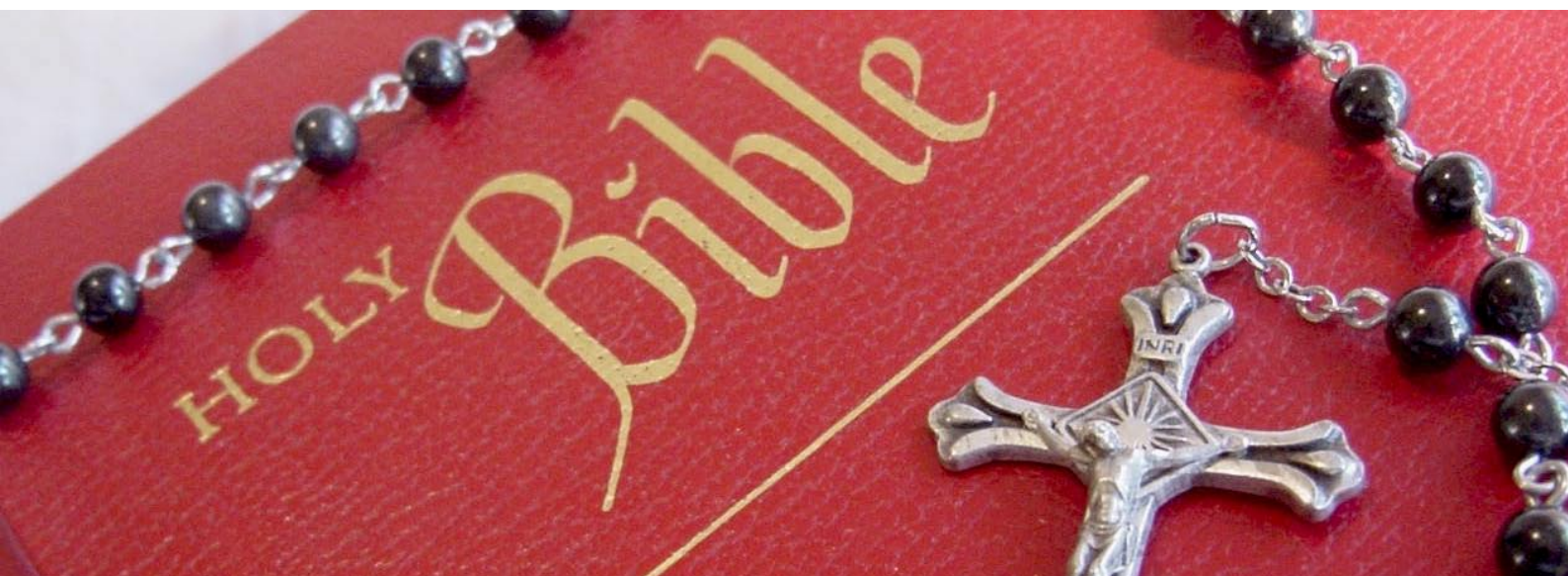
Western Christian Churches follow the Gregorian calendar while Orthodox Churches follow the Julian calendar. Therefore, they celebrate Christmas (and Easter) at different times. For Western Christianity, Christmas falls on 25 December while for Orthodox Christianity, Christmas falls on 7 January.

## Easter

Easter is the most important Christian festival. In Western Christianity, the dates of Easter were set in early Christian times using the Lunar Calendar, and hence Easter falls sometime between 22 March and 25 April, depending upon the date of the full moon. In Orthodox Christianity, Easter falls between 4 April and 8 May.

Good Friday (Easter Friday) commemorates Jesus' death on the cross for our sins and many Christians attend a church service. Easter Sunday commemorates the Resurrection of Jesus from the tomb.

In Australia, Good Friday is a public holiday and most shops are closed. There is a public holiday on Monday following Easter Sunday, however this is not a religious holiday.



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### Ascension

The Ascension refers to the belief that Jesus ascended to heaven, in the presence of his disciples, 40 days following the Resurrection.

### Pentecost

Pentecost commemorates the descent of the Holy Spirit upon the Apostles and women followers of Jesus 55 days after Easter. Some Christians may engage in religious activities on this day.

Western Christianity and Orthodox Churches base their dates on different calendars. For specific dates, see the Cultural Diversity calendar at <http://www.latrobe.edu.au/cdip>

### Some common misconceptions about Christianity

- The Easter Bunny is not a Christian concept;
- Father Christmas/Santa Claus is a mythical rather than a Christian figure.

## Further Reading

ABC Religion and Ethics:  
Christianity – General  
<http://www.abc.net.au/religion/stories/s817468.htm>

Australian Bureau of Statistics Year Book Australia, 2006: Religious Affiliation  
<http://www.abs.gov.au/AUSSTATS/abs@.nsf/Latestproducts/BFDDA1CA506D6CFACA2570DE0014496E?opendocument>

World Council of Churches  
<http://www.oikoumene.org/en/home.html>

