

Main Religious Festivals

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- [Main Religious Festivals](#)

Nowadays, even in secular societies, most holidays are linked to a **religious festival**. The **common calendar** is based on the **Gregorian calendar**. Since most countries use it only as a **civil calendar**, one may think that the civil and the religious calendars are two different things. However, for most of human history, a calendar was **both civil and religious**.

Sun, Moon and planets

In ancient societies, **astronomical phenomena** were used to mark time. A **day** is the time it takes for the **Sun** to return to its culmination point. The **beginning of the day** is not always the same. In the Hebrew and Islamic calendars, the day begins at **sunset**; in the Roman calendar, it begins at **midnight**.

A **year** is the time needed by the Sun to go back to the same position in the sky (or more accurately the orbital period of the Earth). The **solar year** is 365.242 days long. The solar year helps to keep track of the seasons, which is very important in agrarian societies.

For shorter periods, **phases of the Moon** can be used. In many languages, *month* and *moon* are cognates; in Latin, the original word for *moon* was used for *month*, and a new word was made, *luna* (from earlier **luks-na*, the thing that gives light). The period between two new moons (**lunar month**) is 29.53 days long. In most calendars, the duration of the month is conventional (30 or 29 days). However, in the **Islamic calendar**, the beginning of the month is determined through **actual sighting** of the new moon: at the end of the 29th day of a month, if the new moon can be seen, then it is the first day of the next month, otherwise it is the 30th day of the month. In the **Roman calendar**, 30-day months were given an extra day because even numbers were a bad omen — leaving February with only 28 days.

Twelve full lunar cycles make a **lunar year**, i.e. 354.37 days, which is 11 days shorter than the solar year. In order to have the holidays roughly at the same time of the solar year, the **Hebrews** added an **intercalary month** 7 times in a cycle of 19 years in order to correct the drifting of the holidays through the solar year. Before the time of Muhammad, **Arabs** used the **Nasī'** (postponement), whose meaning is a matter of debate. Some scholars think it was a kind of intercalary month. Others consider it as the moving of some holidays through the calendar, which disturbed the difference between ordinary and sacred months. Muhammad forbade the *Nasī'*: this is why, in the common calendar, the Muslim holidays happen earlier each year.

The **Romans** also added an intercalary month, but the decision was made by the pontiffs and, during the 1st c. B.C., civil wars and political troubles disrupted almost every institution, so the calendar was in complete disarray. **Julius Caesar** decided to create a 365-day year by adding one or two days to the 29-day months (with February still having only 28 days), and adding an **intercalary day** every 4 years. Months were no longer linked to the moon, but the drifting was now very limited and the method of the intercalary day was much more simple and automatic. The new calendar is called the **Julian calendar**.

However, there was a slight miscalculation that gave 3 days in excess every 400 years. This is why pope Gregory XIII (pope from 1572 to 1585) ordered a new calculation of the intercalary day, thus creating the **Gregorian calendar**. In a divided Christendom, Catholic countries quickly adopted the new calendar, but Protestant and Orthodox countries were reluctant to implement a papist innovation. During the 17th and 18th centuries, the Gregorian calendar was adopted for civil and religious use in Protestant countries. In the early 20th century, Orthodox countries decided to switch to the Gregorian calendar only for **civil matters**, and the Eastern Orthodox Church kept the Julian calendar. After 1923, some Churches, such as the patriarchates of Constantinople, Alexandria, Antioch and Romania and the Churches of Cyprus and Greece, adopted the **Revised Julian calendar**, which introduced a new calculation of the intercalary day: this calendar is more accurate than the traditional Julian calendar, but is not the Gregorian calendar — although they are almost identical. However, all Eastern Orthodox Churches kept the **traditional calculation of Easter**.

The **week** is a shorter cycle within a month. The best-known week is the **Hebrew week** of 7 days, linked to the tale of the Creation in six days and the institution of the seventh day as a day of rest (*Shabbat*). However, there were other 7-day cycles in the Ancient Near East. Days are named after the planets.* The week may have been a Babylonian creation, but it is unclear if the Hebrew week is an independent creation or a variation of this week. During the 1st and 2nd centuries AD, this 7-day cycle replaced the traditional 8-day cycle in the Roman Empire. The Christianisation of the Roman calendar assimilated this cycle to the Hebrew week.

More information on:

- [the Jewish calendar](#)(introduction)
- [the Christian calendar](#) (introduction)
- [the Muslim calendar](#) (introduction)

*In ancient astronomy, planets were the moving bodies in the sky: Saturn, Jupiter, Mars, the Sun, Venus, Mercury and the Moon. Each planet ruled an hour of the day, and the day is named after the planet ruling the first hour. This is why the order of the days is not the same: Saturn day, Sun day, Moon day, Mars day, Mercury day, Jupiter day, Venus day. Through the *interpretatio Germanica*, Germanic people used the Germanic counterpart of the Roman gods: Týr (Old English Tiw: Tiwes day) for Mars, Odin (Old English Woden: We(o)dnes day) for Mercury, Thor (Old English Thunor: Thu(n)res day) for Jupiter, Frigg (Old English Frige: Frige day) for Venus.

Jewish holidays



1. At the beginning of the Shabbat, candles are lit and the Kiddush (a blessing sanctifying Jewish holidays) is recited over a cup of wine and a hallah (a bread, usually braided, eaten on ceremonial occasions). [Credits](#)

The Jewish holidays celebrate **key moments of the sacred history of the Jews**. Some may also have a **national** and/or **agricultural** meaning: this is why many are linked to a particular season.

The most important holidays are the seven feast days prescribed by the Law, during which work is prohibited: **Rosh Hashanah** (New Year), **Yom Kippur** (Day of atonement), first day of **Sukkot** (Feast of Booths, also translated as Feast of Tabernacles), **Shemini Atzeret** (Eighth [Day] of Assembly), the first and last day of **Pessah**, and **Shavuot**.

Other holidays were added, such as **Hanukkah**, which celebrates the re-consecration of the Temple or **Tisha B'Av**, a day of mourning, especially of the destruction of the two Temples.

Since the creation of the State of Israel, new holidays were created, such as **Yom HaShoah** (remembrance of the Holocaust) or **Yom Ha'atzmaut** (Israel's Independence day). Their observance as religious holidays is not universal within Jewish communities outside Israel.

More information on:

- [Jewish festivals](#)

Christian holidays



2. Procession for the Assumption of Mary. Processions are found in every Christian denomination. Participants usually bear banners and sing hymns. [Credits](#).

In the Christian calendar, there is a distinction between **fixed and mobile holidays**. The first are set on a **specific day of the year**: Christmas (25 December), Epiphany (6 January), the Assumption (15 August). The second are set on a **specific day of the week**: Easter and Pentecost (Sunday), and Ascension Day (Thursday).

The Christian calendar contains two main cycles that are common to all Christian denominations with only slight variations. The first in the liturgical year is the **Christmas cycle**. It begins with **Advent**, a time of **preparation for the coming** (Latin *adventus*, hence the name) of Christ on Earth. **Christmas** celebrates the **birth of Jesus**. It is followed by other festivals, such as **Epiphany** (the manifestation of the divinity of Jesus) and ends with the **Presentation in the Temple** (2 February).

The most important cycle is the **Easter cycle**. It begins with **Lent**, a time of fasting and atonement. The last week of Lent starts with **Palm Sunday** (the entry of Jesus in Jerusalem), and is called the **Holy Week**: it contains some important holidays such as **Holy Thursday** (Last Supper of Christ) and **Holy Friday** (Passion of Christ). It ends with **Easter** (the resurrection of Christ); forty days later, the **Ascension** celebrates the ascension of Christ to Heaven. The cycle ends ten days later with **Pentecost** (50 days after Easter), which commemorates the descent of the **Holy Spirit** upon the Apostles.

Between these two cycles is the **ordinary time**. It contains many holidays, sometimes very important, but there are many differences between denominations

because they stem from specific devotions: the Assumption / the Dormition of Mary, the Cross, the Trinity, Christ the King, national saints...

More information on:

- [Christian festivals](#)

Muslim holidays



The *iftar* (fast breaking) is the evening meal marking the end of the daily fast during the Ramadan. It is often done as a community.

3. *Iftar in Sultan Ahmet mosque (Istanbul).* [Credits](#)

The Islamic calendar contains four **sacred months**, when war and fighting of all kind are forbidden: Rajab (7th month), Dhū al-Qa'dah (11th month), Dhū al-Ḥijjah (12th month) and Muḥarram (1st month). Ramadan (9th month) is a special month of fasting between sunrise and sunset. It ends with the **Eid al-Fitr** (Festival of fast breaking), one of the most important holidays in Islam.

Most holidays are related to the predication of Muhammad. Their date may vary between communities. The **Laylat al-Qadr** (Night of Destiny) commemorates the revelation of the Quran to the angel Jibril, who passed it to Muhammad during the twenty-three years of the predication. The **Laylat al-Mir'aj** (Night of the Ascension) commemorates the journey of Muhammad to the farthest mosque, the ascension of Muhammad to heaven and his journey to the underworld with Jibril.

There are some exceptions, like **Eid al-Adha** (Feast of the Sacrifice), the most important Muslim holiday, which commemorates the **sacrifice of Abraham**. It is set just after the days of the **Hajj**, the pilgrimage to Mecca, which is said to have been established by Abraham and restored by Muhammad.

Some holidays are a bit controversial: the **Mawlid** celebrates the birth of the Prophet. It is widely followed in the Muslim world, but some denominations, notably Salafism and Wahhabism, consider it as a religious innovation.

Some holidays may also have different meanings. In **Sunni** Islam, '**Āshūrā**' is a minor holiday commemorating **Moses's fasting** after the crossing of the Red Sea. In **Shi'a** Islam, it commemorates the martyrdom of **Husayn ibn Ali** after the **battle of Karbala**, and is followed by a 40-day period of mourning.

More information on:

- [Muslim festivals](#)