

INTRODUCTION

December 1, 2004

SUBJECT: Religious Holidays

The Defense Equal Opportunity Management Institute provides the following information paper on six religious holidays/activities that normally occur around the December timeframe. The intent is to share information about various religious holidays which members of the Department of Defense celebrate during the holiday season.

The information was compiled from web links at <http://www.interfaithcalendar.org/>.

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Jerry C. Scarpate
Director of Research

Bodhi Day

What is Buddhism?

The prince, Siddhartha Gautama, left his home at age 29 to discover the meaning of life. After six years of discipline under the guidance of a number of spiritual teachers, he still hadn't found what he was looking for. While traveling with a group of fellow seekers, he went off by himself, broke his fast, and sat down under a tree vowing not to arise until he understood. He sat day and night, and on the eighth day came to a realization. That realization became the founding principles of modern Buddhism. From that point forward, he was referred to as the Buddha, the Enlightened One.

What is Bodhi Day?

Bodhi Day is usually observed December 8th or the Sunday immediately preceding this date, according to Mahayana tradition, of Siddhartha Gautama's realization and presentation to his fellow seekers of the Four Noble Truths:

1. All beings are subject to suffering. No one escapes... suffering is universal.
2. The cause of suffering is Ignorance. And Ignorance of oneself is the greatest Ignorance.
3. Ignorance, the cause of suffering, can be overcome, and
4. The way to overcome Ignorance is the Eightfold Path.

What is the Eightfold Path?

1. Right Views means to keep ourselves free from prejudice, superstition, and delusion... and to see correctly the true nature of life.
2. Right Thoughts means to turn away from the hypocrisies of this world and to direct our minds toward Truth and Positive Attitudes and Action.
3. Right Conduct means to see that our deeds are peaceable, benevolent, compassionate, and pure... and to live the Teachings daily.
4. Right Speech means to refrain from pointless and harmful talk... to speak kindly and courteously to all.
5. Right Livelihood means to earn our living in such a way as to entail no evil consequences -- to seek that employment to which can give our complete enthusiasm and devotion.
6. Right Effort means to direct our efforts continually to the overcoming of Ignorance and craving desires.
7. Right Mindfulness means to cherish good and pure thoughts, for all that is said and arises from one's thoughts.
8. Right Meditation means to concentrate on the Oneness of all life and the Buddhahood that exists within all beings.

Christmas

What is Advent?

The season of Advent begins the fourth Sunday before Christmas. The first Sunday of Advent is the Christian Church's "New Year's Day". Advent comes from the Latin word for "coming" or "arrival" referring to Jesus Christ's birth and subsequent second coming. Advent is a time of joy to celebrate Christ's birth, but also a somber time of penance and preparation for his return. The Advent wreath is a circle of evergreen branches that symbolizes God's endless love for his people. Three of the candles are purple (symbolizing repentance) and the fourth is pink (symbolizing joy). Some wreaths may have a white (Christ) candle in the center. One candle is lit on the first Sunday of Advent, two on the second Sunday and so on until all candles are lit. The candles remind believers of the light of God (Christ) coming into the world, and the candlelight grows brighter in the darkness as each week passes.

What is Christmas?

Christmas is the celebration of Jesus' birth in Bethlehem. Christian scholars speculated that Jesus was conceived at the spring equinox (March 25th), and therefore was born on December 25th or winter solstice. In many churches December 25th marks the feast of the Annunciation, when the angel Gabriel announced to Mary that she was to be the mother of Jesus. The feast of Christmas also coincides with a Roman feast of the "Unconquered Sun God". In response, Christians celebrated the feast of the "Son of Righteousness". The Christmas tree probably originated in medieval (paradise) plays. Plays were performed throughout Europe during Advent. They told the story of mankind from the creation of Adam and Eve until the birth of Jesus. A tree onstage was decorated with apples to symbolize the Garden of Eden. People began the custom of putting a "paradise tree" laden with gifts and candles in their homes during the Christmas season to celebrate paradise regained through the coming of Christ. Evergreens, from ancient times a symbol of life and eternity, have always had a prominent place in Christian celebrations. Holly, with its prickly green leaves and red berries, suggested the Christ Child born, in the manger, would bear a crown of thorns and shed drops of blood. Mistletoe, which has a long history with healing, would come to symbolize the healing power of Jesus Christ. Many nations have contributed to a rich mosaic of Christmas traditions, from placing candles in the window in Ireland, to the Christmas novena or nine days of prayer before Christmas, popular in Latin countries.

Hanukkah

What is Hanukkah?

Hanukkah, the Feast of Dedication or the Festival of Lights is a Jewish festival celebrated for eight days in the Hebrew month of Kislev, which usually occurs in mid to late December. Hanukkah recalls the struggle for religious freedom and commemorates the victory of the Jews over the Hellenistic Syrians in year 165 B.C.E. In the year 167 B.C.E the Greek king, Antiochus Epiphanes, began a campaign to force the Jews under his rule to formally adopt Greek practices. As early as 199 B.C.E., Greek rulers had issued anti-Jewish decrees. Sabbath observance, the study of Torah, and male circumcisions were forbidden. In addition, Greek gods and other symbols of Greek culture were put inside the Holy Temple, desecrating the center of Jewish ritual life in Jerusalem. By the time of Antiochus' campaign, only one Jewish family was willing to take a stand against the Greeks. This stand later became known as the Maccabean Revolt. The word Maccabees means "Men who are as Strong as Hammers." Under the leadership of Judah Maccabee, the Maccabees reclaimed the Jewish Temple. The Talmud says that when the Jewish army wanted to rededicate the Temple, they were unable to find enough specially prepared oil to light the Menorah, a holy lamp, or candelabra, used in the Temple service. Finally, in one Temple chamber, the Maccabees found a single bottle of oil, which normally would have lasted only one night. However, by a miracle, the one bottle of oil lasted eight nights, until new oil, fit for Temple use, could be produced. This is the miracle Jews commemorate to this day. By lighting the eight Hanukkah lights of the menorah, Jews everywhere recount the triumph of their ancestors against immorality, the rededication of the Temple in Jerusalem and the miracle that a one day supply of oil lasted eight days. In America, Jewish families celebrate Hanukkah at home. They give and receive gifts, decorate the house, entertain friends and family, eat special foods, and light the holiday menorah. The Hanukkah menorah is called a "Hanukiyah". It has nine candle holders. There are eight candles, one for each night of Hanukkah, the ninth is called the Shamash and is used to light the other eight candles. One of the best known symbols of Hanukkah is the dreidel. A dreidel is a four sided top with a Hebrew letter on each side. The letters mean "A Great Miracle Happened There." Dreidel is a popular game played during the holiday. Players use pennies, nuts, raisins, or chocolate coins as tokens. The player spins the dreidel. When the dreidel stops, the letter that is facing up decides the fate. "Nun" - nothing happens, "Gimel" – player takes all tokens, "hey" - player takes half the tokens, and "Shin" – player must put one token into the pot.

Kwanzaa

What is Kwanzaa?

Kwanzaa (Quansa) is a holiday celebrated by many African Americans. It is held December 26th through January 1st and was started in 1966 by Doctor Maulana Karenga, Professor at the California State University, Long Beach, California.

Seven Principles of Kwanzaa - There is one principle for each of the seven days of Kwanzaa in the following order.

Umoja (unity) to strive for and maintain unity in the family, community, Nation, and race.

Kujichagulia (self-determination) to define oneself, name oneself, create for oneself, and speak for oneself.

Ujima (collective work and responsibility) to build and maintain community together and make ones sister's and brother's problems ones own problems, and to solve them together.

Ujamaa (cooperative economics) to build and maintain stores, shops, and other businesses as a community.

Nia (purpose) to make a collective vocation the building of community to restore people to their traditional greatness.

Kuumba (creativity) to do as much as one can to leave the community more beautiful and beneficial than when it was inherited.

Imani (faith) to believe with ones heart in people, in parents, in teachers, in leaders and in the righteousness and victory of struggle.

The Kinara (candle holder) is placed atop the Mkeka (straw mat). The Mishumaa Saba (seven candles) represents the Nguzo Saba (seven principles). Each candle represents a distinct principle beginning with Umoja. Candles are then lit each day alternately from left to right. Three red candles should be placed on the left and three green candles should be placed on the right.

Colors of Kwanzaa - Black represents the face of the people. Red represents the blood people shed. Green represents hope and the color of the motherland.

Ramadan

What is Ramadan?

Ramadan is the annual Muslim spiritual event of fasting that occurs during the ninth month of the Islamic calendar, the month of Ramadan. Based on the lunar system, the precise beginning and ending of Ramadan varies from year to year. Fasting during the month of Ramadan, as laid down in the holy Quran (2:183-185), is the fourth pillar of Islam. According to the Quran, the entire month is ordained for fasting and abstinence by all adult Muslims. Fasting begins at daybreak and ends at sunset, and during the day eating, drinking, and smoking are forbidden. The term, Ramadan, is derived from the Arabic root word ramida or ar-ramad denoting intense scorching heat and dryness. While the heat represents the force that helps shape, form, and mold virtually every matter - from metal and plastics, to plants and living cells - the observance of Ramadan helps a Muslim remold, reshape, reform, and renew his or her physical and spiritual disposition and behavior. Ramadan is intended to cleanse and purify the believer. Of all the pillars of Islam, none is more special than fasting. Fasting represents one's true self-denial before his or her Creator. Islam teaches that fasting is a shield, an armor protecting the Muslim believer from sinful acts. Muslims believe that when you eat the blood flow increases considerably, and the energy level increases, making it easier for Satan to use your own energy level to tempt you to commit sins. Fasting enables the Muslim believer to guard against sin.

Eid - ul - Fitr

The day after the end of Ramadan is Eid - ul- Fitr, the festival that celebrates the breaking of the fast with special prayers and festivities. This is a day of happiness for those whose fasts and prayers have been accepted by Allah.

Zakat - ul - Fitr

During Ramadan Muslims become familiar with the experience of the needy and poor who stay hungry because of lack of food. Fasting enables Muslims to appreciate the blessings of Allah and become charitable towards those in need.

Wicca Yule

What is Wicca?

The word “Witchcraft” dates back many hundreds of years and means literally “The craft of the wise”. This is because the Witches of old were the wise ones of their village, knowledgeable in the art of healing, legal matters, and spiritual fulfillment. A Witch had to not only be a religious leader, but also the doctor, lawyer, and psychologist of the village. Today, people have reclaimed this word in their pursuit of Wicca religion. A Witch is an initiate of Wicca, one who has earned the right to call themselves Priest, or Priestess, through study, self-evaluation, and spiritual living. Wicca itself is an attempt to recreate European (mostly) Shamanistic Nature Religion, adapting it to fit modern lives. Witches are worshipers of the Earth and its many cycles. It is believed that deity is found not only outside of our realm, or plane of existence, but that it is found within every living thing and all that supports it. Therefore, there is an attempt to live in harmony with the Earth, and each of its creatures.

What is Yule?

Yule or winter solstice happens near December 21st which is the shortest day of the year. The world has had long periods of darkness, and it grows weary from the lack of sun. Yule is the day the Goddess gives birth to the Sun King. The old Holly King who has ruled the Earth since Midsummer gives his life so that the new infant sun king (or Oak King) can be reborn into the world, bringing the newness of life and rebirth. After this day, the days grow progressively longer, and this return of the sun is celebrated through birthing rituals and gift giving (when the sun is born, it is a birth celebration for all, hence the tradition of gift giving).

Colors of the season are red, green, silver, and white.

Decorations include a Yule Log, cinnamon sticks, Yule Tree, and Mistletoe.

Incense scents include pine, cedar, and rosemary.