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 arrival of European settlers in the 1800s who brought their own faiths to Australia. Included were the Anglican, Methodist, Catholic, Presbyterian, Congregationalist, Lutheran and Baptist churches.
- By 1901, approximately 40% of the population was Anglican, 23% Catholic and 34% other Christian. About 1% followed non-Christian 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 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 Hebrew Scriptures (Old Testament) and the Christian Scriptures (New Testament).

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. Christians are commanded to love their fellow humans as themselves.

Jesus was a Jew and early Christianity was a Jewish sect. Christianity separated from Judaism almost 2,000 years ago.

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.

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 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, Episcopal, Lutheran, Methodist, Salvation Army, Seventh Day Adventist, Pentecostal and Baptist. In the 1970s, the Methodist, Presbyterian and Congregational 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.

Christian Churches distinguishing themselves from the Catholic, Orthodox and Protestant Churches

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.

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.

NOTE: These are just some of the Christian-based denominations. You might wish to visit Religions in Canada webpage http://www.forces.gc.ca/hr/religions/engraph/religions_toc_e.asp or the ABC's The Sacred Site http://www.abc.net.au/compass/explore/otherx.htm for an overview of other Christian denominations.

Christian religious observance

Place and style of worship

The church is the place of Christian worship although Christians can worship God anywhere. Worship at church involves prayer, singing of hymns and listening to the priest or ministers cite and explain passages from the Bible. Holy Communion, characteristic of most Christian Churches, is a ceremony of remembrance of the self-giving death of Christ. Some Christian denominations require confession (reconciliation) and forgiveness from sin.

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. It is divided into two parts, the Hebrew Scriptures (Old Testament) and the Christian Scriptures (New Testament). The Christian Scriptures consist of four Gospels (different accounts of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus) and various letters to early churches.

Christian dress code

Western and Orthodox Christianity do not prescribe a dress code for lay Christians. Traditional clerical dress within Western Christianity includes the wearing of black with a special white collar. These days, most clerics and nuns do not dress traditionally. Orthodox priests wear a black tunic and headdress or hat.

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.

Lent

In Western Christianity, Lent is a period of 40 days from Ash Wednesday to Easter. Traditionally it is marked by fasting from food and festivities. It is a period of study and reflection in preparation for celebrating Easter.

Great Lent

The term ‘Great Lent’ is used to distinguish Orthodox Christian Lent from Western Christian Lent. During Great Lent, Orthodox Christians must abstain from consuming animal products, olive oil, spirits and wine.

Other requirements

Some Christian denominations are required to abstain from certain food types all the time. Examples include:

- Jehovah's Witnesses avoid eating blood or blood products
- Mormons abstain from two consecutive meals on the first Sunday of each month. They also abstain from alcohol, tea and coffee and tobacco products.
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.

**Epiphany**
The Epiphany celebrates the revelation of God to humankind, through the incarnation of Jesus Christ. It falls on 6 January each year. It is not usually recognised as a public holiday but some Christians may spend time in religious activities.

**Ash Wednesday**
Ash Wednesday is the first day of Lent and occurs 46 days before Easter. On Ash Wednesday, which always falls on a Wednesday, worshippers have a cross made of ash marked on their foreheads by a priest or minister, symbolising repentance and purification.

**Maundy Thursday**
Maundy Thursday, also known as Holy or Great Thursday, is the Thursday before Easter Sunday. It commemorates the Last Supper of Jesus Christ with the Apostles.

**Easter**
Easter is the most important Christian festival. Good Friday (Easter Friday) commemorates Jesus’ suffering on the cross. In Australia, Good Friday is a public holiday and most shops are closed. Many Christians go to church on this day.

Easter Sunday commemorates the Resurrection of Jesus from the tomb. In Western Christianity, Easter falls sometime between 22 March and 25 April. In Orthodox Christianity, Easter falls between 4 April and 8 May.

In Australia, there is a public holiday on Easter Monday. This is not a religious holiday.

**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.flinders.edu.au/CDIP/calendar](http://www.flinders.edu.au/CDIP/calendar).

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
Respecting religious and cultural diversity at Flinders

Flinders’ Equal Opportunity Policy

Flinders’ Equal Opportunity Policy is inclusive of the diverse elements associated with culture – age, race, religion, political conviction, marital status, sexuality, gender, pregnancy, disability.

The Equal Opportunity Policy states:

*Flinders University values and celebrates the social and cultural diversity that is reflected in its community, is committed to achieving equality of opportunity in education and employment and to promoting an environment where students and staff are able to study and work effectively, without fear of unlawful discrimination, harassment or bullying.*

The following information may assist in creating an environment that is considerate and respectful of the religious and cultural traditions of staff and students at Flinders University.

The Religious Centre

Flinders University has established a Religious Centre for the benefit of staff and students, in support of the pursuit of their diverse religious and spiritual views, beliefs and practices.

The Religious Centre is intended to provide a space on campus where religious or spiritual activities can take place, and a meeting place for groups and individuals with a focus on or interest in religious or spiritual matters. It is located at the southern end of the Mall.

Religious bodies appoint chaplains to the University. The chaplains work together as a multifaith team as well as being a resource for particular faiths. For further information visit [http://www.flinders.edu.au/religiouscentre/](http://www.flinders.edu.au/religiouscentre/).

Religious observance

Where it is reasonable and practicable to do so, flexible work and study arrangements can be made to accommodate the religious obligations of staff and students at Flinders. Examples include:

- negotiated flexible work/study arrangements between heads of departments/supervisors and staff and students who are required to pray at certain times of the day or to attend other religious ceremonies at particular times of the year
- consideration of the main religious festivals when determining examination dates, assessment dates, field trips and arranging placements
- consideration given to student requests for extensions to accommodate religious observance

References and further information

ABC: The Sacred Site
[http://www.abc.net.au/compass/explore/christs.htm](http://www.abc.net.au/compass/explore/christs.htm)

ABC Religion and Ethics: Christianity – General

ABC Religion and Ethics: Christianity – Orthodox
[http://www.abc.net.au/religion/stories/s817554.htm](http://www.abc.net.au/religion/stories/s817554.htm)

Australian Bureau of Statistics Year Book Australia, 2006: Religious Affiliation

Australian Government – Living in Harmony: Australia is Religiously Diverse

BBC Religion and Ethics: Christianity
[http://www.bbc.co.uk/religion/religions/christianity/](http://www.bbc.co.uk/religion/religions/christianity/)

Flinders University Religious Centre

Flinders University Cultural Diversity and Inclusive Practice

Government of Western Australia – Office of Multicultural Interests: Culture and Religion – Guidelines for Service Providers – Christianity

Orthodox Holidays, 2001-2009
[http://www.infoplease.com/ipa/A0777391.html](http://www.infoplease.com/ipa/A0777391.html)

Victorian Government Better Health Channel: Food Culture and Religion

World Council of Churches: Oriental Orthodox Churches

Author: Anna Kalaitzidis, Flinders University, 2006
Expert advice: Geoff Boyce, Uniting Church Chaplain, Religious Centre, Flinders University