

MAIN FAITHS EXPLAINED

Christianity and the Christian Community

Christianity is one of the largest religions in the world and it is the biggest faith background in Northern Ireland. Christians believe that Jesus Christ was the Son of God. Christians base their faith on His teaching and example. The holy book of Christians is the Bible which has an Old Testament (recording the story of the people of Israel before Jesus) and a New Testament (the story of Jesus and the early Christian church). There are many major denominations including Presbyterian, Catholic, Methodist, Anglican or Church of Ireland, Baptist, Free Presbyterian and several others. The various Christian denominations often cooperate in ecumenical relationships, although some Christian faiths do not endorse or practice ecumenism. Many Christian-based organisations have been involved in cross community peace building work for decades.

The main day of worship is usually Sunday. Major festivals are at Easter (death and resurrection of Jesus) and Christmas (birth of Jesus).

There are no dietary restrictions on most Christians, although some abstain from alcohol.

Islam and the Muslim Community

Islam is one of the largest religions in the world. There are around 10,000 Muslims in Northern Ireland. Muslims live by a religious code of values and behaviours around culture, morals, family, relationships, food and dress. Islam focuses on what unites people and Muslims may often see themselves as one nation regardless of identity. The Prophet Mohammed (peace be upon him) lived around the sixth century CE (which Christians define as AD) and is the messenger of Allah. Islam submits to Allah, which means the one and true God. The Muslim holy book is the Qur'an. It also contains the life stories of Abraham, Moses and Jesus who is recognised as a major Prophet although not regarded by Muslims as the Son of God. While the Mosque is the place of worship, any clean place can be used. The main day of worship is a Friday.

The major festival is Ramadan celebrating the revelation of the Qur'an to Mohammed.

During Ramadan Muslims fast from dawn to sunset. Eid is also important – the festival marking the end of Ramadan. Muslims will not consume meat or by- products derived from pigs. Muslims will eat Halal food which refers to the means of slaughter of animals. Alcohol is forbidden.

Judaism and the Jewish Community

The ethos of the Jewish religion is based on the Torah. There is One Creator of the world, God, and it is Him the Jewish people worship and give thanks and praise. The Torah is the Bible, Genesis through to Deuteronomy then the books of The Prophets and The Book of Writings. In all there are 24 Books of the Bible or The Tanach as it is known in Hebrew. The life cycle for a Jewish person centres around the Shabbat (Sabbath) the seventh day of the week and the Jewish festivals such as New Year & The Day of Atonement, Sukkot (Tabernacles) & Pesach (Passover) to name a few. The Jewish people have a strict code of dietary laws that are set down in the Torah.

This is called Kosher. Within these laws there needs to be a strict separation of meat foods and utensils and dairy ones. There are certain rites of passage within Judaism such as Bar-Mitzvah or Bat-Mitzvah to mark the coming of age for a boy or girl.

Marriage is important as the Jewish line is continued on through the maternal line. The language of the Torah is Hebrew and is considered to be a holy language. It is also the language of the majority of Jewish prayers.

Worship is from sunset on Friday to sunset on Saturday.

Hinduism and the Hindu Community

There is a vibrant Hindu community in Northern Ireland and there is a dedicated Indian Community Centre in Belfast. There are a number of Hindu temples. Hinduism is the oldest living religion. It is based on the Vedas scriptures and there are many philosophical schools. Hindus believe in one Supreme God but that God can be manifest in many different forms. Therefore, there are a number of deities including Lord Krishna, Lord Shiva and Lord Rama. There are a number of sacred books, the most famous of which is the Bhagavad Gita (the Song of God). Worship includes prayers, incense burning and mantra chanting.

There are a number of festivals including the Holi Festival of Colours and the Diwali festival of lights. Hindus believe all living things are spiritual by nature and therefore Hindus lead a life of non-violence.

Hindus do not eat meat or fish and many do not eat eggs. Vegetarian and vegan dietary requirements are therefore important. Some Hindus will eat meat but not beef. Pork is avoided. Alcohol is forbidden.

Sikhism and the Sikh Community

Sikhism is a relatively young religion, around 500 years old. Founded by Shri Guru Nanak Dev Ji, Sikhs believe that God's truth lies within all religions. The holy book is the Guru Granth Sahib. Sikhs have an individual relationship with one God and believe salvation can be found through good deeds as well as God's grace.

The word Sikh means a pupil or disciple. Sikhs pray many times a day and five symbols may impact on dress and appearance: hair is not cut and must be kept clean and protected, a comb is carried for securing the hair, a miniature sword is carried to symbolically defend truth and justice, shorts are worn by men as a symbol of chastity, and a bracelet is worn on the right wrist to indicate oneness with God. Turbans are worn.

Sikh festivals or Melas often coincide with Hindu festivals. The central festival is Vaisakhi, a celebration of harvest and of Guru Gobind Singh's creation of the Khalsa, the pure brotherhood of Sikhs. Sikhism forbids smoking and consuming alcohol. Devout Sikhs will not eat any animal product or by-product but many Sikhs do eat meat. Ritually slaughtered meat such as Halal is forbidden.

Baha'i and the Baha'i Community

Baha'i is a relatively new world religion, just 200 years old. There is a vibrant Baha'i community in Northern Ireland and Baha'i Spiritual Assemblies in five towns.

Baha'is believe in the essential unity of the great world religions and that God has revealed himself through a series of interventions including Abraham, Jesus, Buddha, Krishna and Muhammed. Baha'is believe in equality between genders, elimination of the extremes of wealth and poverty, universal education and the unity of humanity. Baha'i has no clergy as such but daily prayer is required – a short prayer said in private is required each day. There are a number of holy days in a year and one period of fasting for 19 days immediately before the Spring equinox which is usually around the 21st March. Sacred text includes the writings of Báb and Bahá'u'lláh including the Most Holy Book. The texts of other religions are also considered sacred texts by Baha'is.

There are no dietary requirements. Alcohol is forbidden.

Buddhism and the Buddhist Community

Buddhism is largely based on the teachings of Buddha or the awakened one. He was an enlightened teacher that helped people end suffering to attain the highest happiness or nirvana.

There are two major branches of Buddhism: Mahayana including Zen and Tibetan Buddhism (Dalai Lama is the head monk); and Theravada. But there are also many more denominations. Both main branches are represented in Northern Ireland. There is no personal relationship with God. The way to enlightenment is through morality, meditation and wisdom.

Buddhists can pray at a temple or at home; often they will use mantras or short prayers. There are a number of festivals the most important of which is Wesak (Buddha Day) which falls in May or early June.

Denominations will differ on dietary rules but generally diet is vegetarian or vegan. Alcohol is forbidden.

Humanism and the Humanist Community

Humanist thought has been around for at least 2,500 years. There are examples of humanist thinking in ancient China, India, and Greece.

Humanism is a philosophy or an approach to life that represents a way of trying to understand ourselves and our world from a non-religious perspective. Humanists trust to evidence and the scientific method when it comes to understanding how the universe works and reject the idea of the supernatural: they are therefore either atheist (they do not believe in a god or gods) or agnostic (they believe we can never know whether a god or gods exist). They believe our morality evolved naturally and they make their ethical decisions based on reason, empathy, and a concern for the wellbeing of human beings and other animals. They believe that, in the absence of any evidence of an afterlife or any discernible purpose to the universe, human beings can and should act to give their own lives meaning by seeking happiness in this life and helping others to do the same.

Humanists do not have any particular rituals or practices they must perform; however, many take the opportunity to recognise and celebrate landmarks in people's lives, and humanist celebrants conduct naming ceremonies, weddings, and funerals for the non-religious.