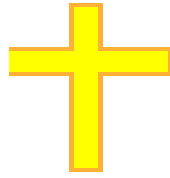


CULTURE AND RELIGION



Christianity

Introduction

Christianity is a monotheistic religion based on the life, death and teachings of Jesus of Nazareth who lived about 2000 years ago in Palestine, then part of the Roman Empire. With 2.1 billion adherents, or about one-third of the total world population, Christianity is the largest world religion.

Christianity is the major religion in Europe, North and South America and Australasia. Today there are three main historic and theologically distinctive streams of Christianity – Roman Catholic, Protestant and Eastern Orthodox. The sacred text of Christianity is the Bible, composed of the Old Testament and the New Testament. Fundamental beliefs of Christianity include the doctrine of the Trinity: one God in three persons, the Father, Son and Holy Spirit and the simultaneous divinity and humanity of Jesus Christ.

Christian churches are divided into a variety of denominations, each with their own specific ways of worshipping and teachings. However, all are united in the acknowledgement of the Lord Jesus Christ as God and Saviour as witnessed to by the scriptures and in the life of the Church.

Christianity was introduced with the European settlement of Australia in 1788. During the 19th century European settlers brought their own traditional Christian denominations to Australia. Patterns of migration over two centuries have shaped the profile of Christian affiliations in Australia.

Christianity has had a significant influence on the development of Australia's social and cultural identity and the nature of its political and legal systems and institutions, and on the principles that underpin our democracy. Australia has no official state religion and people are free to practise any religion they choose, as long they obey the law. Australians are also free not to have a religion.

Demographics

Many denominations of Christianity are represented in Australia. In 1901, Australia's population was predominantly Anglo-Celtic, with 74% of identified as Protestant and 23% as Roman Catholic. After World War II with migration from Europe, there was a rapid growth in Eastern Orthodox churches and Catholicism. More recently, migration from South East Asia and the Middle East has increased the ethnic diversity of existing Christian denominations. By the other end of the 20th century, 43% of Australians identified as Protestant, 27% as Roman Catholic, and 3% as Eastern Orthodox.

Australia is still a predominantly Christian country and in the 2006 Census about 64% of the Australian population or 13.5 million people stated an affiliation with Christianity representing a decrease from the 71% proportion in the 2001 Census. In the Northern Territory according to the 2006 Census, 54.6% of the population is affiliated with Christianity. The three largest Christian denominations in the Northern Territory are Catholic (21.1%), Anglican (12.3%) and Uniting Church (7.0%). Other statistically significant Christian denominations in the Northern Territory are Lutheran and Greek Orthodox.

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Background and Origins

Christianity commenced more than 2000 years ago, in Israel. Christianity began with Jesus, a Jewish man who taught a group of disciples about a new concept of the Judaic religion. Jesus' teachings emphasised love of God and love for people. When Jesus was identified by religious and political authorities of the time as a threat, they arrested him on a trumped-up charge and executed him by hanging him on a cross. Three days later his disciples were surprised to discover an empty tomb where Jesus had been laid. Many resurrection appearances convinced the disciples that Jesus had been raised from the dead, and that this was God's validation of all he had taught them.

Christianity spread around the world from these humble beginnings.

Major achievements of Christianity include:

- The beginnings of hospitals;
- The beginnings of schools, universities and general public education;
- Numerous charitable institutions in which the command of Jesus that his disciples should "love one another" were put into practical effect; and
- The inspiration for many world-famous art works, and musical compositions.

Key Beliefs

The Christian religion and way of life is enshrined in the Bible. The Bible is a book of writings which is considered to be sacred by many Christians, and which includes the Hebrew Scriptures and a collection of writings from the early Christian Church. The Christian writings include 'gospels', or stories of the good news of Jesus, and letters from the leaders of the churches.

The word Christian means disciple or student of Christ. The Christian way of life is based on:

- Belief in Jesus as the Son of God; who is part of a Trinitarian God- Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Christians describe their faith in "One God, in three persons".
- Acceptance of Jesus' teachings;
- The significance of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus for the transformed life of the believer.
- Prayer and worship; and
- Social justice and practical assistance to others in need.

Greeting

The following sensitivities need to be observed on greeting or introduction:

- Christians usually shake hands when greeting one another. Some Christians will embrace. The religious leaders of some churches are greeted in a special way by their adherents, who will kiss their rings or the crosses they carry. Non-adherents are not required to do this.

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Names and Titles

- Many Christian leaders are given honorific titles. The most common is that instead of “Mr” or “Ms/Mrs/Miss” the word “Reverend” is used, such as “The Reverend Jones” or ‘The Reverend John Jones’. The “Reverend Jones” may also be referred to as “Father Jones” if he is male.
- Female Christian leaders are not usually called “Mother”, but “Reverend”. The title “Mother” usually refers to a Christian female leader of a group of religious women called nuns.
- There are other honorific titles for Christian leaders who are in higher leadership positions in the Church. These titles may include: Archbishop, Bishop, Archdeacon, Moderator, President, etc.
- Other Christian leaders may prefer the word “Pastor” instead of “Reverend”.
- Salvation Army officers are given names which are taken from the regular army, such as “Captain” or “Major”.
- The members of the Society of Friends (Quakers) do not use honorific titles at all with their names. Many will not use “Mr” or “Ms/Mrs/Miss”.

Seating

Many Christian communities would be happy for men and women to sit together in a public meeting, but it is wise for the organiser of a meeting to check this with the participants, as some Christians from different cultural groups may prefer men and women to sit separately.

Dress and Appearance

- Some Churches have distinctive dress to distinguish their leaders from others. Many churches use the ‘clergy collar’, a plain, often black, shirt with a white tab in the collar, as their distinctive dress. Others wear a cross or crucifix prominently, as a way of defining their role in the Church.
- Orthodox priests wear black tunics and distinctive headdresses or hats.
- Salvation Army members, as well as officers, wear a uniform with distinctive badges.
- Many church leaders have specific garments for use when they lead worship. If a Christian worship service is being conducted, the leaders may require a room in which they can dress in their special liturgical garments prior to the service.

Food, Drink and Fasting

- Many Christians have no particular cultural practices regarding food and drink.
- However some Christians do not drink alcohol. These include many members of the Salvation Army and other Protestant churches. It is wise to provide alternatives for these people.
- Many Christians fast during Lent, the six week period prior to Easter.
- Many Christians do not eat meat on Good Friday and Fridays of Lent.

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Religious Festivals, Observances and Days of Significance

A Christian can worship at any time of the day or night but the expected worship time is Sunday mornings.

There are numerous Christian festivals:

Christmas: the 25th of December each year, celebrates the birth of Christ. The Eastern celebration is on 6th January. Christian celebration of Christmas should not be confused with the secular holiday of Christmas. Christians celebrate with carols which talk of the incarnation of Jesus. Whilst the giving of gifts is part of the Christian celebration, it is not the main focus of the celebrations. Many churches emphasise the need to give to the needy through charities at Christmas.

Easter: a celebration which begins on Maundy Thursday (the night before Jesus died), then is celebrated solemnly on Good Friday (the day Jesus died) and through Easter Saturday (a time for special prayers and meditations) to Easter Day (a joyful celebration of the resurrection of Jesus). Easter falls at different dates each year, during March and April the Western World uses the Gregorian calendar to calculate the date of Easter, the Eastern (Orthodox) Churches use the Julian calendar so there may be differences in these dates. Easter eggs are symbols of resurrection for many Christians. Many Christian communities will have special foods at Easter.

Pentecost: the joyful celebration of the gift of the Holy Spirit to all believers. Always celebrated 50 days after Easter.

Saint days: some Churches celebrate saint's days.

The following religious practices are also important to Christians:

- The Eucharist, Communion, Lord's Supper or Mass: these are different words for the same ritual of commemoration of Jesus' last meal with his disciples
- Baptism or some other form of initiation
- Corporate worship
- Bible reading
- Prayer

Language and Communication

It is the policy of the Northern Territory Government to provide an interpreter where clients require assistance in English. Agency staff can contact the Translating and Interpreting Service (TIS) on telephone number 13 14 50.

Family and Marriage

The varying family characteristics of religious groups should be appreciated. For Christians these include:

- Many Christian churches allow divorce, but some do not.
- The family is seen as the basic unit of society.
- Churches advise members not to engage in sexual relations outside of marriage.
- Many Christian churches do not accept the validity of homosexual relationships.
- Christian singles are free to choose their own marriage partners but many Churches encourage Christians to marry other Christians.

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Medical Ethics

Many Christians have very strong views surrounding issues such as abortions, euthanasia and in-vitro fertilisation procedures.

Death and Related Issues

Death and the grieving process are particularly significant for all religious communities. For some Christians the following sensitivities are to be respected:

- The Last Rites for Catholics
- Baptism for dying infants
- Respect for the body

Funerals may include either burials or cremations. Some Christians have strong preferences for burials, and some Christians prefer crypts rather than graves. Funerals are always a Christian worship event, usually led by a Minister. They may occur in a church or at the cemetery.

Counselling/Interviews

Christians wish to have a Christian counsellor for many issues. Many will ask their own religious leader to be called for them. Chaplains are provided in many institutions. These chaplains may work ecumenically, that is, they will be available to any Christian no matter what denomination they belong to, though they would respect the ritual or sacramental practices of the individual.

Other Sensitivities

Other cultural and religious sensitivities that need to be acknowledged and respected include:

- Most Christians object to the use of the name of God or Jesus in a non-respectful way. This is called "blasphemy".
- Christians have great respect for the Bible and for their religious symbols, including the Cross. They would be distressed to see them mishandled.
- Churches are places in which it is usual to be reverent and to behave appropriately.
- Most Christians will not worship in places where the religious symbols of other religious groups are prominent.

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Further Enquiries

This information sheet has been produced by the Northern Territory Council of Churches with the support of the Office of Multicultural Affairs. For further information please contact:

- Rev Kate Fraser
President
Northern Territory Council of Churches
Ph: 8985 2658
- Correspondence can be forwarded to:
The Secretary
Northern Territory Council of Churches
PO Box 39818
Winnellie NT 0821
Email: ntccdarwin@gmail.com
- The peak body for Christian Churches is the National Council of Churches in Australia
Web: www.ncca.org.au