

## CRS Reports & Analysis

Christian Holidays: Fact Sheet

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#### Introduction

Christianity is one of the three major Abrahamic faiths, alongside Islam and Judaism. According to the Pew Research Center, approximately 70% of Americans self-identify as Christian.<sup>1</sup> There are a large number of Christian traditions, with great variation in which holidays are celebrated and how.

This fact sheet highlights two holidays—Easter and Christmas—observed by a significant portion of Christian American denominations and addresses the ways these holidays are currently recognized in the United States.

This fact sheet is designed to assist congressional offices with work related to Christian holidays. It contains sample speeches and remarks from the *Congressional Record*, presidential statements and remarks, and selected historical and cultural resources.

This is part of a series of Congressional Research Service fact sheets on religious holidays in the United States.

#### Major Holidays and Observances

With the exception of Christmas, the official observance of most Christian holidays is determined at the state or local level.

Internationally, many countries celebrate these and other Christian feasts and liturgical days at the national level. Parliaments, banks, schools, and other institutions may be closed on these days.

#### Easter

Easter commemorates the resurrection of Jesus Christ and is the oldest annual Christian holiday or feast.<sup>2</sup> The holiday is often observed by a special church service, followed by a family or community gathering that involves a special meal. Many Christians also include in their celebrations, processions or parades; egg dyeing, rolling, and hunts; and sweets gifting.<sup>3</sup>

Easter does not occur on the same date each year. It is observed the first Sunday following the first full moon on or after March 21.

State and local governments do not typically observe Easter as an official holiday, although some do recognize other days related to Easter with early or all-day closings. For example, state offices are closed on the Friday before Easter in Connecticut, Delaware, Hawaii, Indiana, Louisiana, New Jersey, North Carolina, North Dakota, and Tennessee.

#### Christmas

Christmas commemorates the birth of Jesus Christ. The holiday is often observed by special church services and community-wide activities, such as caroling. Although the celebration of Christmas varies greatly the world over, some

common elements in the United States are Christmas plays or pageants, decorating and displaying Christmas trees, and gift giving.<sup>4</sup>

Christmas is always observed on December 25. This date was chosen sometime in the fourth century A.D. and is generally considered to have been chosen to supersede non-Christian holidays commonly celebrated at the same time of year.<sup>5</sup>

Christmas is a federal holiday. It was one of the first four holidays established by federal legislation.<sup>6</sup> When the original legislation was signed into law in 1870, it was an unpaid holiday exclusively for federal employees in the District of Columbia. The push for this legislation was led mainly by commercial interests that "wanted certain holidays to be formalized."<sup>7</sup>

Occasionally, Presidents have issued executive orders closing all executive branch departments and agencies of the federal government on the day immediately preceding or following Christmas.

### Congressional Recognition

Some Members of Congress make floor statements, issue press releases, or enter Extensions of Remarks into the *Congressional Record* to recognize federal holidays and observances. The following are examples that may be of assistance in preparing such statements:

Representative Doug LaMalfa, "[A Christmas Greeting](#)," *Congressional Record*, daily edition, vol. 162 (December 8, 2016), p. H7554.

Representative Ted Poe, "[A Piece of Home This Christmas](#)," *Congressional Record*, daily edition, vol. 160 (December 8, 2014), p. H8824.

Representative Louie Gohmert, "[An Easter Prayer](#)," *Congressional Record*, daily edition, vol. 158 (March 29, 2012), p. H1796.

Senator Robert C. Byrd, "[Springtime and Easter](#)," *Congressional Record*, daily edition, vol. 154, part 2 (March 13, 2008), p. S2119.

### Presidential Recognition

From the lighting of the National Christmas Tree to the White House Easter Egg Roll, many Presidents have made remarks in relation to Christian holiday celebrations held at the White House. They have also issued statements recognizing the observance of Christian holidays. Some recent examples, from the *Compilation of Presidential Documents*, include

[Remarks at the White House Easter Egg Roll](#)—President Donald J. Trump, April 17, 2017.

[Statement on the Observance of Orthodox Christmas](#)—President Barack Obama, January 6, 2017.

[Remarks on the Lighting of the National Christmas Tree](#)—President Barack Obama, December 1, 2016.

[Statement on the Observance of Orthodox Easter](#)—President Barack Obama, April 29, 2016.

[Statement on the Observance of Easter](#)—President Barack Obama, March 25, 2016.

[Statement on the Observance of the Coptic Orthodox Christmas](#)—President Barack Obama, January 7, 2014.

[Message on the Observance of Christmas 2008](#)—President George W. Bush, December 23, 2008.

### Historical and Cultural Resources

Numerous resources provide information on the history and culture of Christian holidays. Some of these include the following:

Library of Congress, "[Easter Week Illuminations](#)." This blog post talks about several representations of Easter Week in the Library's collection.

Library of Congress, "[Highlighting the Holidays](#)." This series of blog posts discusses particular holiday symbols and traditions, mainly relating to Christmas.

Library of Congress, "[National Jukebox: Christmas](#)." This search returns all of the Christmas music hosted by the Library's [National Jukebox](#) project.

Smithsonian, "[Religion in Early America](#)." This website is for an exhibit at the National Museum of American History that shows 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century religious practices in the United States.

The Library of Congress Prints and Photographs section has many images of people celebrating [Christmas](#) and [Easter](#) in its online catalog.

#### Related CRS Reports

CRS Report R41990, [Federal Holidays: Evolution and Current Practices](#), by Jacob R. Straus.

CRS Report R43539, [Commemorations in Congress: Options for Honoring Individuals, Groups, and Events](#), coordinated by Jacob R. Straus.

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## Footnotes

1. Gregory Smith et al., *America's Changing Religious Landscape*, Pew Research Center, May 12, 2015, p. 4, at <http://www.pewforum.org/2015/05/12/americas-changing-religious-landscape/>.
2. "Easter," in *A Dictionary of Comparative Religion*, ed. S. G. F. Brandon (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1970), p. 252.
3. Christian Roy, "Easter (Christianity)," in *Traditional Festivals: A Multicultural Encyclopedia*, vol. 1 (Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-CLIO, 2005), pp. 121-128.
4. Christian Roy, "Christmas (Christianity)," in *Traditional Festivals: A Multicultural Encyclopedia*, vol. 1 (Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-CLIO, 2005), pp. 61-72.
5. "Christmas," in *A Dictionary of Comparative Religion*, ed. S. G. F. Brandon (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons,

1970), p. 195.

6. CRS Report R41990, [\*Federal Holidays: Evolution and Current Practices\*](#), by Jacob R. Straus.

7. Olivia B. Waxman, "The Surprising Story of Christmas in the United States," *Time*, December 23, 2016