

## *Introduction*

The world of the 21<sup>st</sup> century in North America is becoming increasingly populated by persons who adhere to a wide diversity of religious perspectives, including no religious beliefs at all. The notion that the United States of America is a Christian country cannot be sustained any longer, if it ever was true. We live in a multi-religious context while fewer and fewer persons practice any form of religion. Increasingly, immediate and extended families are comprised of persons with varying commitments to different religions. We also recognize that there are religious “hybrids” among us who are Christian/Buddhist or Jewish/Christian because of interreligious marriages or personal affiliations to more than one religious tradition.

As we navigate this multi-religious world, there are many “world religions” or “comparative religion” books written about the history, tenets, and sacred texts of many of the religions in the world – especially the three religions that have their roots in the historical figure of Abraham: Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. These are excellent resources in one’s quest to understand the differences and similarities found among these three great religions. Focusing primarily on history, tenets, and texts however, these books can only give cursory attention to the broad “practices” engaged in by adherents of these three religions as they participate in the various occasions for ritual observance.

For practicing Jews, Christians or Muslims, however, it is often the rhythms of their yearly religious calendar that provide an underlying foundation for their

lives – their thoughts, moods, emotions, self-assessments, actions, spiritual practices, engagement in prayer and communal participation in religious observances. For each religion, there are times during the religious year that are designed for inner reflection on one’s spiritual life – a personal inventory of how one is making progress or missing the mark in adherence to their religious tradition. And there are times in the year when our religions call us to reach out to others in acts of kindness, justice, charity and mercy. This is not to say that both the inward life and outward expressions of one’s religion are not a part of one’s daily religious practice. It is to say however, that each religion sets aside times during the year when collectively the community pays a little more attention to one expression over the other.

The special ritual occasions that highlight the year within each religion have been formed by specific beliefs but are most notably rooted in a metanarrative, a story of grand proportions, that underlies the practices. The adherents to these three religious groups are “people of a book” – sacred text(s) that form the basis of the narratives. The yearly cycles of each religion retell key moments of the metanarrative, remember important events, and provide opportunities to reconnect to our roots in history.

The yearly cycle raises to the fore highlights of the metanarrative, the textual documents that support the narrative, the historical traditions, and the theological beliefs associated with each. As we participate in the observance of each of the ritual occasions in the cycle, we remember the stories of our faith and recommit our lives to following the teachings that are foundational to our respective religion. Throughout time, specific worship/prayer practices, symbols and/or symbolic gestures have become associated with many episodes in the narrative and each occasion that is observed in some

fashion. Customs regarding what to eat, what to wear, and what to do have also emerged.

This book seeks to address the unique ways that each of these three religions retells/reenacts/remembers their metanarrative on a yearly basis through ritual gatherings known as festivals, seasons, holidays, holy days, “occasions”. It is an attempt to identify the yearly rhythms that guide our common yearnings for religious ritual practice.

We recognize the sheer magnitude and complex nature (not to mention the ludicrous attempt) of such an undertaking because each of these religions has “branches” that have grown out of the original trunk of the tree. Judaism is historically divided between Ashkenazic and Sephardic, and Ashkenazic Judaism now has four major branches: Orthodox, Conservative, Reconstructionist, and Reform with diversity within each, along with minor branches such as Renewal, Humanistic, and Transdenominational. Christianity includes Orthodox Christianity, Roman Catholicism, and Protestantism (with two main branches within Orthodoxy and hundreds of denominations within Protestantism as well as offshoots that don’t fit neatly into any of these categories).

Likewise, Muslims are not a monolithic group and exhibit great diversity within. They can be divided into two major groups: Sunnis and Shias. The former consists of four schools of thought (*madhabs*): Hanafi, Maliki, Shafi’i and Hanbali. The major branches amongst the Shias are: Twelvers, Isma’ilis, Zaydis, and Bohras with the overwhelming majority being Twelvers. The mystical tradition within Islam is expressed in Sufism. Both Sunnis and Shias have embraced aspects of the Sufi tradition to various degrees.

It is true that *intrafaith* beliefs and practices (those differences within a particular religion) are often as diverse

as *interfaith* beliefs and practices. Each denomination and subset has diverse opinions about the level of importance as well as the specific practices associated with each yearly observance. In some instances, the degree of importance and practices are denominationally rooted; in other instances, they are determined by the national or local cultures. The Islamic celebration of Eid al-Adha will take on different practices by African American Muslims who converted to Islam through the teachings and influence of Malcolm X than American Muslims who immigrated from Turkey or Iran. Or, the minor observance of Chanukah in Judaism will take on greater significance in the United States because it occurs at the same time as Christians are celebrating the birth of Jesus and therefore becomes an alternative for Jewish children to the parties and gift-giving of the North American Christian influenced culture.

Despite the great diversity present within each religion and the many limitations of such a project, for the most part, there is still a story, traditions and texts that guide these yearly cycles. It is the broad scope of these yearly religious/ritual/worship observances for each religion that we hope to highlight here.

The creation of an interfaith seminary collaborative in Southern California precipitated the idea for this book. Three graduate educational institutions initially partnered together so that students and faculty of all the institutions could learn more about one another, dispel stereotypes of the “other,” and collaborate on issues related to the common good for our communities and peacemaking in our world: Claremont School of Theology (an ecumenical Christian seminary)<sup>1</sup>, the Academy of Jewish Religion,

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<sup>1</sup> Because the student population at Claremont School of Theology is primarily Protestant in orientation, and because this book was written with our collaborative context in mind (Claremont School of Theology, Bayan Claremont, and the Academy of Jewish Religion, California), the Christian chapter will most likely reveal a more Protestant slant.

California (an ecumenical Jewish seminary), and Bayan Claremont (a new ecumenical Islamic graduate institution).<sup>1</sup> Students have the opportunity to train in the same classroom for a wide variety of leadership roles within their respective religious communities (rabbis, ministers, imams, chaplains, teachers, scholars), in interfaith settings, non-profit organizations, and secular environments. Having practitioners of various religious traditions in the same classroom, participating in co-curricular and extra-curricular activities requires a sensitivity not only to the rhythms of the academic semester but also to the rhythms of the various yearly religious observances. On any given day, students' minds, hearts, and bodies are involved in academic settings but they are also participating in the daily and seasonal practices of their faith tradition. Is it Ramadan when Muslim students are fasting? Is it Advent when Christians are in eager anticipation of the celebration and feasting of Christmas? Is it the holy Days of Awe between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur when Jews celebrate the birth of the world, the New Year of Years, yet simultaneously enter a 10 day period of self-assessment and repentance?

What does it mean to be in a community that honors the various religious observances and practices of the "other"? How do we respect difference and diversity while at the same time seek common ground? Designed for a North American audience, this book does not presume to cover all that is present in the North American context, let alone around the globe. We clearly recognize that not all practicing Jews, Christians, or Muslims will

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<sup>1</sup> The University of the West (a Buddhist institution) is also part of our collaborative and Claremont School of Theology had a Center for South Asian Religions. While the hope is that one day a book like this will be expanded to include the yearly ritual observances of Buddhists, Hindus, Sikhs, Jains, Baha'is, etc., here we focus solely on the three Abrahamic traditions.

follow/participate in all the “occasions” we include in this book, and we are sure there are practices within various denominations/subgroups that have been omitted. Some will feel that we have included too much that is observed by only a small minority, and some may feel that we haven’t covered enough. Yet we still believe that bringing the ritual cycles of practitioners of the Abrahamic religions into conversation with one another is an important undertaking alongside the study of the history, beliefs and sacred texts of each of these religions that can readily be found elsewhere. As we seek to understand our neighbors who are rooted in one of these three traditions, it is important to know something of their metanarrative that undergirds their observances, their emotional rhythms at different times of the religious year, the foundational sacred texts, symbols and symbolic acts.

This book is primarily a handbook for religious leaders and laity interested in being sensitive to those friends, neighbors, and co-workers who practice one of these three religions. What follows are brief descriptions documenting the important feasts/holidays/seasons or holy occasions that guide the yearly observances of each faith tradition. The three chapters begin with an overview of the calendar, important background information, and a short synopsis of the metanarrative that is the underlying framework for the yearly ritual cycle. What follows is a list of common topics for each occasion, though not all topics relate to every religion or occasion within a religion’s yearly observances. The topics included are:

Name of the “occasion” (feast/holiday/season/holy day/day of remembrance, etc.)

Begins/Ends: *When does the “occasion” begin and end?*

Purpose: *What is the purpose of the “occasion”? What does it honor, celebrate, remember, inaugurate?*

- Theological Emphasis:** *What religious or theological themes are highlighted during this “occasion”?*
- Important Texts:** *What are the sacred or historical texts that provide the story behind this “occasion” or that are commonly read during this “occasion”?*
- Preaching/Teaching:** *Does this “occasion” usually include preaching or some other form of speech/lecture/proclamation/teaching?*
- Moods:** *What are the emotional moods or tones that are associated with this “occasion”? Is this a time of celebration and rejoicing or a time for repentance or a time of mourning?*
- Primary Symbols (not included for Islam):** *In Judaism and in Christianity, are there symbols that are usually associated with this particular “occasion”?*
- Primary Symbolic Gestures or Symbolic Acts:** *Are there symbolic gestures or symbolic actions that are often performed/done during this “occasion”?*
- Required, Recommended or Optional:** *Is participation in/adherence to this particular “occasion” considered a requirement by one’s tradition or is it recommended or something that only a particular subset of people would participate in?*
- Restrictions:** *Are there any restrictions associated with this “occasion”? While usually this would refer to whether one could/should go to one’s job during the “occasion,” there may be other restrictions to consider.*
- Common Customs:** *Are there common customs associated with the “occasion” that take place outside the worship/prayer context?*
- Fasting/Feasting Practices:** *Are practitioners of the religious tradition encouraged to fast or feast in connection to this “occasion”?*
- Foods:** *Are there particular foods that are commonly eaten or avoided because of this “occasion”?*

Additional Worship/Prayer/Ritual Services or Special Focus for Regular Weekly Worship/Prayer: *Are there any additional worship/prayer times /rituals that take place for this "occasion"? Is there a specific theme or focus during the regular weekly gathering for prayer/worship that would be highlighted that would tie to the "occasion"? Are there unique prayers or songs that are included in worship/prayer time because of this "occasion"?*

The final chapter "Comparisons and Conclusions" addresses the discoveries made in the creation of this book – the "aha!" moments that occur when learning about another tradition's practices that sparks recognition of one's own in its similarity or difference.