Comparative Religions:
Dawali, Hannaka, Eid al-Fitr, and Christmas

**Eid al-Fitr**

One of the most joyous days in the Islamic calendar, Eid al-Fitr, also known as Eid ul-Fitr or Eid, is a celebration that marks the end of [Ramadan](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2015/06/15/ramadan-2015-facts-dates_n_7554256.html) (a holy month of fasting observed by Muslims).

This year Eid ul-Fitr is expected to [fall on](http://www.when-is.com/eid-al-fitr-2015.asp) July 17, 2015. It is celebrated on the first day of Shawwal, the 10th month of the Islamic lunar calendar. Traditionally, the observance begins with the sighting of the new moon.

The [first Eid al-Fitr](http://www.bbc.co.uk/religion/religions/islam/holydays/eidulfitr.shtml) was celebrated in 624 CE by the Prophet Muhammad and his companions after the victory of the battle of Jang-e-Badar.

To mark the beginning of Eid and in accordance with the [Sunnah](http://www.islamicity.com/mosque/hajj/Adha/sunnah_of_eid.htm), or practices of the Prophet Muhammad, many Muslims wake up early in the morning and pray Salat ul-Fajr, or the pre-dawn prayer. After brushing their teeth, taking a bath and wearing perfume, they have breakfast before heading off to perform special congregational prayers known as Salaat al-Eid. Many Muslims recite the [takbir](http://middleeast.about.com/od/a/g/allahu-akbar-definition.htm), a declaration of faith, on the way to the prayer ground and give special charitable contributions known as [Zakat al-Fitr](http://www.arabnews.com/featured/news/776836).

Eid al-Fitr is a day of great merriment and thanksgiving. Muslims celebrate by gathering with friends and family, preparing sweet delicacies, wearing new clothes, giving each other gifts and putting up lights and other decorations in their homes. A common greeting during this holiday is Eid Mubarak, which means, “Have a blessed Eid!”

Diwali

**Diwali has become a national festival in India that is enjoyed by most Indians regardless of faith: Hindus, Jains, Buddhists, and Sikhs.** Diwali, or Dipawali, is India's biggest and most important holiday of the year. The festival gets its name from the row (*avali)* of clay lamps (or *deepa)* that Indians light outside their homes to symbolize the inner light that protects us from spiritual darkness. This festival is as important to Hindus as the Christmas holiday is to Christians.

Diwali, celebrated in October or November each year, originated as a harvest festival that marked the last harvest of the year before winter. India was an agricultural society where people would seek the divine blessing of Lakshmi, the goddess of wealth, as they closed their accounting books and prayed for success at the outset of a new financial year. Today, this practice extends to businesses all over the Indian subcontinent, which mark the day after Diwali as the first day of the new financial year.

Indians celebrate with family gatherings, glittering clay lamps, festive fireworks, strings of electric lights, bonfires, flowers, sharing of sweets, and worship to Lakshmi. Some believe that Lakshmi wanders the Earth looking for homes where she will be welcomed. People open their doors and windows and light lamps to invite Lakshmi in.

Hindus interpret the Diwali story based upon where they live:

In North India they celebrate the story of King Rama's return to Ayodhya after he defeated Ravana by lighting rows of clay lamps.

South India celebrates it as the day that Lord Krishna defeated the demon Narakasura.

In western India the festival marks the day that Lord Vishnu, the Preserver (one of the main gods of the Hindu trinity) sent the demon King Bali to rule the nether world.

In all interpretations, one common thread rings true—the festival marks the victory of good over evil.

Non-Hindu communities have other reasons for celebrating the holiday:

In Jainism, it marks the *nirvana* or spiritual awakening of Lord Mahavira in Oct. 15, 527 B.C.

In Sikhism it marks the day that Guru Hargobind Ji, the Sixth Sikh Guru was freed from imprisonment.

**Five Days of Diwali**

On the first day of Diwali, housewives consider it auspicious to spring clean the home and shop for gold or kitchen utensils.

On the second day, people decorate their homes with clay lamps or *diyas* and create design patterns called *rangoli* on the floor using colored powders or sand.

This is the main day of the festival when families gather together for *Lakshmi puja*, a prayer to Goddess Lakshmi followed by mouth-watering feasts and firework festivities.

This is the first day of the new year when friends and relatives visit with gifts and best wishes for the season.

On the last day of Diwali, brothers visit their married sisters who welcome them with love and a lavish meal.

Hanukkah (also known as Chanukah) is the Jewish Festival of Lights and lasts eight days. It usually falls in late November or December.

Jews celebrate Hanukkah to commemorate the Miracle of the Oil. The Hebrew word Hanukkah means "dedication". Over 2000 years ago, in 165 BC, the Jews in Judea rebelled against their Syrian ruler, Antiochus, because he insisted that all Jewish people must worship Greek Gods. After three hard years of fighting, the Jews defeated Antiochus and, to celebrate, they restored the Temple of Jerusalem - which had been taken over by the Syrians - and rededicated it to their God.

As part of the celebrations they lit an oil lamp which should have been kept burning all the time, even though they could only find enough oil to keep it burning for one night. But a miracle occurred, and the oil lamp stayed lit for eight days, which was the time it took to make new oil for the lamp. This  was the Miracle of the Oil.

It was then declared that every year, Jews would remember the day with an eight-day Festival of Lights and celebrate the miracle of the oil by placing eight candles in a Menorah (a special candlestick) and lighting one candle for each evening of the celebration. Electric lights are sometimes used, especially where where an open flame might be dangerous, such as a hospital room. The Hanukkah lights are meant to remind those walking by the home about the holiday’s miracle, so the Menorah is displayed at a prominent window or near the front door.

During Hanukkah, people exchange gifts and give to the poor and needy.

Christmas

Christmas is the date set aside for the celebration of the birth of Jesus Christ. Christians celebrate it on December 25th all over the world. Jesus was not born on December 25th exactly but this date was chosen to coincide with the pagan Roman celebrations honoring Saturnus (Harvest God) and Mithras (Ancient God of Light). The day of this celebrations came just after the winter solstice, that is the shortest day of the year in the northern hemisphere. The celebrations were to make known that winter is not forever. It was a form of worshiping the sun.

Jesus was born nearly 2000 years ago. To the Christians, Jesus is the Son of God and the Savior/Saviour of the world. The Christians believe that He came to die for our sins so that we may go to heaven.

Many of our Christmas customs began long before Jesus was born. They came from earlier festivals which had nothing to do with the Christian church. Long time ago people had mid-winter festivals when the days were shortest and the sunlight weakest. They believed that their ceremonies would give the sun back its power. The Romans, for example, held the festival of Saturnalia around 25 December. They decorated their homes with evergreens to remind them of Saturn, their harvest god, to return the following spring.

Some of these customs and traditions were adopted by early Christians as part of their celebrations of Jesus' birthday.

In Victorian times some new ideas such as Father Christmas, Christmas cards and crackers were added to the celebrations.

**Hanukkah**

A Jewish festival celebrated at this time of year, Hanukkah started out as a minor holiday focused on an historic event, the rededicating of a temple after driving out the Greek invaders who had desecrated it. According to the accompanying legend, there was only enough sacred oil in the temple to burn for one night, but it miraculously burned for eight days, until new oil could be brought in.

American Jews have taken this holiday to new heights. It is difficult to live in the shadow of America’s enormously appealing Christmas festival, but Hanukkah has met the challenge. In an eight-day celebration with gifts given to the household children each of the eight days, lighting a new candle each night is a significant part of the celebration. "Do not curse the darkness; light a candle in the world." The light, of course, represents knowledge and wisdom.

Hanukkah foods are full of symbolism. The favorite potato pancake is a golden symbol of the sun, and the oil in which it fries is a reminder of the sacred oil that gave its all for the temple. No, the potato pancake is not an ancient food; the potato came form Peru and was not a part of the European diet until the 18th century or later.

Hannukah is celebrated around the world for eight days and nights, beginning on the 25th day of the month of Kislev on the [Hebrew calendar](http://www.jewfaq.org/calendar.htm)and ending on the second day of the Hebrew month of Tevet. In 2014, Hannukah begins on the evening of December 16 and ends on December 24.

Thoughts and meditations about Hanukkah, the Festival of Lights. As I understand, it has its origins in a battle that liberated Jerusalem and the Temple there around 167 B.C. When the elders went to light the Temple's lamp, there was only enough oil for one day yet the lamp burned for eight days, this miracle became known as the "Festival of Light" or Hanukkah, lasting eight days.

While meditating on this miracle two thoughts came to me. One, on a community or global level this festival could symbolize the ending of the fear that there is not enough. When the elders came upon the lamp there was only a small amount of oil, only enough for one day. Yet this small amount of oil burned brightly in the temple for eight days, providing light for all those who entered. Let us light such lights in our communities and in our world, symbolizing that there is enough and we will share it with all.

And on a personal level this miracle of light speaks to us also. It asks us to bring the light to the dark places in ourselves and in our world even when we think we cannot. It asks us to continue to shine when there seems not enough. This miracle speaks of a great faith and of our steadfastness in a higher purpose.

Let us all be a part of this Festival of Light sharing the light in relevant and thoughtful ways, and in doing this we enter the realm of miracles.
                             - Ted

**Christmas**

Many of us think that we have always celebrated our Solstice holiday, Christmas, in the way we do today ~ with a massive show of light. We illuminate Christmas trees, decorate our houses and gardens with strings of light, burn candles throughout our homes and logs in our fireplaces, and light up our city streets.

What started as a holy mass in Europe, probably at the time assigned to the birth of Jesus (probably April) was moved back to the Winter Solstice by church fathers to serve several needs. The early church was in competition with the Pagan holiday of the Romans, the Saturnalia, which still exists in our New Year celebrations featuring Father Time ~ Saturn. They were also in hot competition with the Mithra Cult, a spinoff of Zorastrianism, which was a favorite of Roman soldiers. The Mithra Cult was devoted to worship of the sun, which comes down to us today in the Christian Sabbath day ~ Sunday.

During the Dark Ages, as northern Europe’s pagans were converted en masse to Christianity, the church found it difficult to stamp out pagan practices that were dear to the new converts. The many gods and goddesses were converted to saints to whom a good Christian could pray, and even the most primitive totemic practices were absorbed into the new Christmas festival. The Germanic tribes worshipped the evergreen green ~ a symbol of eternal life ~ and the Druids, of what would later be France and England, revered the mistletoe, an oak parasite associated with fertility. We still believe it is lucky to kiss under some mistletoe.

The Yule Log, the great log, making a brilliant fire in the hearth of the local lord, had its roots in another Druid custom: rolling a flaming wheel down a hill on Winter Solstice night, to show the sun how to come back. This flaming wheel ceremony is still found in remote parts of Europe.

Now, what about the symbolic significance of light? The more sophisticated worshippers in the past always recognized that light is associated with wisdom. Being "in the dark" of living in darkness has always meant ignorance and the twin of ignorance, fear. Being illuminated or having a luminous soul means understanding the true meaning of life. Part of the Christian lore of light at this darkest time of year has always meant living in God’s light.

The traditional foods of Christmas also have great symbolic meaning. The fruitcake originated during the Crusades when the European soldiers sent home the wonderful dried fruits of the Muslim East. The custom of putting "sugar plum" in the stockings of good children also dates from the Crusades.