

Thanksgiving: How Different Religions Celebrate Thanksgiving Day

By Zoe Mintz

Saadia Faruqi remembers when she decided to observe Thanksgiving for the first time. It was last year, after she overheard her 7-year-old son tell her preschool-age daughter, “Don’t ask mom about Thanksgiving. We’re Muslims, we don’t celebrate it.”

“The fact that they assume we won’t do Thanksgiving made me re-evaluate a lot of things,” Faruqi, founder and editor of the blog *Interfaith Houston*, said in an interview. Unlike other kids at school, Muslim children don’t normally observe non-Islamic holidays like Halloween, Christmas or Valentine’s Day, she explained. This leads to a lot of “why not” questions, which Faruqi has grown accustomed to answering. But Thanksgiving is different.

While Thanksgiving began as a band of Christian separatists sought a new home in the New World 400 years ago, today it has become a secular holiday that banks on all things American – a big meal, football and parades, topped off with competitive shopping. But for many, their ethnic and religious ties are inextricably linked to everything they do, including how they celebrate turkey day, or don't.

“Why shouldn’t we take part in this? We are American, we are living here, and why not take part in a holiday that does not go against my religion in any way?” Faruqi said.

Much to her children’s surprise and pleasure, Faruqi made a Thanksgiving meal at her home in Houston, and she plans to do the same this year, with an important variation: Barbeque chicken, a dish she grew up on in her native Pakistan, will be served rather than turkey. Family members will take turns sharing what they are thankful for. On the TV there will be video games rather than “the game,” the American football tradition.

Valarie Kaur, a Sikh interfaith organizer, can relate. Sikh families that immigrated to the United States in the early 20th century like hers used to observe Thanksgiving as a way to participate in American culture. But that has changed.

“Today, American Sikh families have made Thanksgiving their own,” Kaur said. Some families choose to make traditional American Thanksgiving food while others serve Punjabi dishes.

And regardless of where Sikhs live, gratitude remains an inherent part of the faith. “The Sikh tradition teaches us to give thanks with every single breath we take. In a way every day for us is Thanksgiving,” said Simran Jeet Singh, 30, a Ph.D. candidate at Columbia University in New York.

Singh typically celebrates Thanksgiving in Texas with his extended family, which can boast more than 50 people. Turkey, vegetarian food and Punjabi dishes are on the menu. Some years, his cousin makes tandoori turkey. “It’s our South Asian roots mixed with our American roots,” he said.

For Dustin Tropp, 21, a SUNY Oneonta student who is a Reform Jew, Thanksgiving includes watching football and eating turkey, but matzo ball soup, challah, brisket and Manischewitz wine will have equal placement on his family’s table. This is true for members of more conservative Jewish denominations as well.

But the American-ness of the day is not absent from Jewish traditions either.

Congregation Shearith Israel in New York City, the oldest synagogue in America, hosts services each Thanksgiving morning where several chapters of psalms are read after the usual morning prayers to give thanks for the religious freedoms of America. It's a service the congregation has been performing since President George Washington first declared the holiday in 1789. Afterwards, the Upper West Side congregation watches the Macy's Thanksgiving Day Parade from the building's portico with hot chocolate and pastries.

"The Jewish community in America is extraordinarily blessed," said Rabbi Jeffrey Fox, who heads Yeshivat Maharat in New York. "We are extraordinarily blessed to live in a community that has the freedom to flourish."

While the story behind Thanksgiving is typically associated with Puritan settlers who held a feast in Plymouth, Massachusetts, in 1621, other ceremonies were recorded even earlier. Episcopalians believe they were the first to hold a day of Thanksgiving in America. They point to how historians recorded a ceremony performed by 38 British settlers from the Church of England on Dec. 4, 1619, at the Berkeley Hundred in Virginia, where they read a proclamation designating the date as "a day of thanksgiving to Almighty God."

The Rev. Donald Lowery, an Episcopalian rector in Henderson, North Carolina, holds this belief but doesn't get hung up on it. He celebrates Thanksgiving much like everyone else.

"I think in most ways Episcopalians are much like the rest of folks in America," Lowery said. "They gather with family and friends, eat a turkey, then on Friday eat the leftovers, then on Saturday make it into soup or sandwiches, then on Sunday marvel at how much is still left over and on Monday give it to the dog, cat or put it into the trash."

For pagans, Thanksgiving belongs to the broader harvest season. Celebrations usually begin with Mabon (the autumnal equinox) in September, when one's crops – a symbolic reference to one's personal goals – are reflected upon.

"That is what truly begins the Thanksgiving season for me," said Bo Nelson, a Wiccan from Wisconsin who works in telecommunications. "So that by the time Thanksgiving Day arrives, it is the culmination of that season and one of our last chances [before winter] that we get to come together with our families, our friends and our spiritual community and truly share in the abundance of what we have grown."

Nelson and his family share a traditional Thanksgiving meal at home followed by a second meal with their spiritual community. Depending on the year, the second meal can take place on the same day as Thanksgiving or the weekend that follows. "This meal is a little less stressful, but equally tasty," Nelson said. In both cases, prayers are said before they dig in. Some pagans choose to say "so mote it be" rather than "amen."

At Circle Sanctuary -- a Wiccan church in Wisconsin which Nelson and his family belong to -- a cornucopia serves as decoration at the main altar. The horn-shaped receptacle is filled with fruit, herbs, nuts, and other produce as an expression of thanksgiving for agricultural bounty, the church's priestess Selena Fox explained. Some families decorate their homes or dinner tables with the container as well.

Nelson said his Thanksgiving celebrations as a pagan do not compare to the traditions he grew up, with which focused on the Pilgrims, Native Americans and football.

"There was a family aspect to coming together, but it really didn't have the same meaning," Nelson said. "Pagan Thanksgiving is tied into so much more than just a single day. It is about a turn of the wheel of the year. It is about the ebbs and flow of personal growth and coming together to celebrate it on a much larger level."

How One Scientologist Celebrates Thanksgiving

By David Aden

People are often curious about the cultures of religions not their own—for example, in my case, whether and how Scientologists view Thanksgiving. I can't speak for all Scientologists, but I can describe how I think about it.

How One Scientologist Celebrates Thanksgiving

For practically everyone in America, conversations during the run-up to Thanksgiving focus on time off work, cooking, football and Black Friday specials. But it's everyone together around a table that will be for our family, like many others, the highlight.

This will be the first Thanksgiving for me without either of my parents, who both passed away this year, and it is a year when complaints in popular culture about the year itself couldn't be more negative or shrill. In light of personal and world events, taking a moment to remember the things for which we are thankful couldn't come soon enough.

I didn't always feel that way. When I was a teenager, I was embarrassed and irked by my father's tradition of having to name something for which each of us was thankful before we could dig in. As I grew older my view changed, in part due to the simple passage of time, but even more thoroughly when I became a Scientologist.

Thanksgiving no longer represented just an acknowledgement of the receipt of others' gifts, it is also the promise of positive things to come. Of course, no one can be guaranteed an unencumbered existence. No one can prevent or defend against all accidents or problems. But neither are we poor victims of every random gust.

For me, the foundational understanding in Scientology—that we are spiritual beings first and inhabitants of mortal shells second—means we have a causative, responsible relation to the world.

So, Thanksgiving may begin with giving thanks. It starts, in the company of those most important to us, with a long-enough pause in daily life to remember and reaffirm those people, actions and purposes to which we owe a heartfelt "thank you."

But Thanksgiving continues, at least in spirit, when we focus our attention on those thanks-deserving things we'd like to both receive and give. We can and do make a difference to our loved ones, to the world around us and to the way our lives unfold.

I'll enjoy the turkey and the pies, the family and the football. I'll probably even leverage the Black Friday sales. But when the dishes are clean and the leftovers consumed, I know that those thanks-worthy things recalled on Thanksgiving will continue to a large measure throughout the year only when I remember them and continue to imbue them with life.

The Way to Happiness by L. Ron Hubbard is a small book that embodies the understanding that we make a difference in the world around us. Mr. Hubbard, the Founder of Scientology, wrote it as a nonreligious moral code that articulates ways, we can help others improve their lives and in so doing gain the happy side-effect of improving our own lives:

One can feel at times like a spinning leaf blown along a dirty street, one can feel like a grain of sand stuck in one place. But nobody has said that life was a calm and orderly thing: it isn't. One isn't a tattered leaf nor a grain of sand: one can, to greater or lesser degree draw his road map and follow it. While no one can guarantee that anyone else can be happy, their chances of survival and happiness can be improved. And with theirs, yours will be.

So, Thanksgiving has become for me an opportunity to not only be thankful for those things we have received but to also recommit ourselves to those things we'd most like to give.