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A Survey of Springtime Religious Traditions

Spring is a time of renewal: the days get longer, the weather gets warmer, and the foliage begins to bloom anew. In that regard, various world religious traditions celebrate renewal this time of year as well. From resurrection to emancipation, many religions celebrate rebirth during this time of year.

EASTER

Easter is observed as a high holy day for Christians. Easter is the culmination of the "Passion of Christ," a season of religious observations that begins with Lent (a 40-day period of fasting, prayer, and sacrifice) and ends with Holy Week. Holy Week includes Holy Thursday (the celebration of Jesus's Last Supper with his Apostles), Good Friday (on which Jesus's crucifixion is observed) and Easter Sunday (where Jesus is resurrected). The resurrection of Jesus, having died for the sins of men, is a fundamental tenet in the Christian faith.

Although the modern Easter holiday is religious in nature, it has pagan roots. Easter is named after *Eostre*, the pagan goddess that symbolizes fertility. The symbolism of a bunny delivering eggs in a basket is unmistakable. The tradition of coloring eggs bright colors is a reflection of spring flowers blooming. The hunt has been historically linked to chickens' return to laying eggs after the long winter months and the search for those eggs as sustenance. Overall, both the historic and modern celebrations of Easter are centered around rebirth and renewal.

PESACH

The Jewish faith celebrates Pesach a week of celebration that commemorates the freeing of Israeli slaves in the book of Exodus. The term *pesach* means to "skip" or "omit" or "pass over." The name is believed to have originated with G-d literally "passing over" the homes of the Jews when he was killing the firstborn sons of Egypt. This is also a tradition rooted in renewal of an emancipated life and a new beginning for the Israelites.

Pesach begins with the Seder dinner, which includes drinking four cups of wine, eating matzah, and eating of symbolic foods on the "Passover Seder plate." The Passover Seder plate contains six items with special significance to the retelling of the Passover and Exodus stories: (1) Maror and Chazeret [romaine

lettuce and endives] are the bitter herbs that symbolize the bitterness and harshness of slavery; (2) Charoset [chopped nuts, grated apples, cinnamon, sweet red wine] represent the brick and mortar Hebrew slaves used to build the Pyramids; (3) Karpas [parsley, onion, or other green vegetable dipped in salt water] symbolizes hope and renewal; (4) Zeroah [roasted lamb shank] commemorating the sacrificial lamb whose blood was painted on the doorway of Israelites so that G-d would pass over that house; (5) Beitzah [roasted egg] representing the circle of life: birth, reproduction, death; (6) Three Matzot representing the breaking of bread.

RAMADAN

Like other springtime observances, Ramadan follows the phases of the moon. The beginning and end of Ramadan are determined by a "moon sighting committee" in Saudi Arabia. The observance begins the day after the committee spots the new crescent moon.

Ramadan is the most sacred of Muslim holidays. According to the Qur'an, it was during this month that this holy book was revealed to the Prophet Muhammed, beginning with the sighting of the new moon, after which abstention from eating, drinking, and other physical pleasures would follow.

The word *Ramadan* originates from the Arabic root *ar-ramad* or *ramida*, which means "scorching heat" or "scarcity of rations." Ramadan is the holy month where Muslims practice the fourth pillar of Islam, *Sawm,* or the act of fasting during the holy month. The fast is believed to be an act of deep personal worship in which Muslims seek a richer perception of God. The act of fasting is also believed to be an exercise of self-control whereby one's senses become heightened to the suffering of the poor. Muslims break the fast at sunset with a meal, *iftar*, accompanied by an evening prayer, *tarawih*. The month of Ramadan concludes with a three-day celebration called *Eid Al-Fitr*. This is a celebration and is a time for family reunion and the favored holiday for gift-giving.