Combating Racism and Prejudice in Schools: Keynotes

Keynote 5
The Abrahamic Religions: Middle Eastern Christians

The following information is also relevant to Keynote 5:

**The Introduction:** Background information outlining the context and purpose of the project.

**Keynote 1 – Violence and Conflict: Issues and Strategies for Schools:** A theoretical background to understanding conflict and violence and how schools can address issues of intolerance.

**Keynote 2 – A Whole-School Approach to Combating Racism and Prejudice:** An audit strategy for schools to plan and monitor their approaches to combating racism. This is adapted from [Racism No Way](http://www.racismnoway.com.au/strategies/framework/body-Schools.html); a web site aimed at teachers seeking to challenge and counter racism.

The following Keynotes cover the nine most significantly represented religions in Australia and include suggestions for classroom activities:

- **Keynote 3 – The Abrahamic Religions: Judaism, Christianity and Islam**
- **Keynote 4 – The Abrahamic Religions: Judaism**
- **Keynote 5 - The Abrahamic Religions: Middle Eastern Christians (this document)**
- **Keynote 6 – The Abrahamic Religions: Islam**
- **Keynote 7 – Arabs and Muslims in Australia**
- **Keynote 8 – Indian Religions: Hinduism**
- **Keynote 9 – Indian Religions: Sikhism**
- **Keynote 10 – Indian Religions: Buddhism**
- **Keynote 11 – Bahá’í Faith**

You can also download a full version of *Combating Racism and Prejudice in Schools*, which includes all of the Keynotes listed above. This full document, as well as all of the above sections can be downloaded from the [Keynotes Explained](http://www.education.vic.gov.au/studentlearning/programs/multicultural/tchkeynotes.htm) page on the [Multicultural Education](http://www.education.vic.gov.au/studentlearning/programs/multicultural/default.htm) site.
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Introduction

According to the most recent Australian census, among Victorians of Arabic-speaking background, there are almost as many people of Christian faith as there are of Islamic faith. The majority of Victoria’s Muslims come from other regional backgrounds (see Keynote 7).

Many of the Middle Eastern Christian communities have a long history with close links to the early Christian Church, which like Judaism and Islam, originated in the Middle East.

Just as there are differences in all faiths in religious practice and social and cultural influences, the Christian Churches of the Middle East have a range of variations not dissimilar to the differences between the various Protestant and Roman Catholic Churches we are more aware of in Australia.

The recognition that Australia is not an exclusively Christian country is reflected in the representation and participation of a number of faiths at state occasions, gradual changes in legal matters such as swearing in of witnesses in courts, and in the conduct of marriage, divorce and burial rites.

The major Christian Churches in Australia have sought dialogue between the many Christian faiths, such as the Eastern and Orthodox Churches, and with other faiths.

Many people are not aware of the beliefs and practices in the range of faiths represented in Australia, including the many Christian faiths. As part of their task of preparing students for effective community relations within a multi-faith society, teachers can help students become informed about faiths represented in Australian society.
Branches of Eastern Christian Churches

The major branches of the Eastern Christian churches are shown below

Table 5.1 Eastern Christian Churches

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<th>The Oriental Orthodox Churches (Non-Chalcedonian)</th>
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<td>Broke away in 451 CE as a result of the Council of Chalcedon</td>
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<td>• Armenian Apostolic Church</td>
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<td>• Coptic Orthodox Church</td>
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<td>• Coptic Catholic Church</td>
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<td><strong>Catholic counterparts to Eastern Orthodox Churches:</strong></td>
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<td>• Melkite Catholic Church</td>
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<td>• Maronite Catholic Church</td>
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**Origins and historical background**

The beginnings of Christianity came about with the founding of the Church in Jerusalem after the resurrection of Jesus Christ, when his followers received the power and inspiration of the Holy Spirit on the first Pentecost (Acts 2: 1–4). This time is marked in the division of the western calendar into periods of Before Christ (BC) and Anno Domini (AD) (Latin for ‘in the year of our Lord’). Common Era (CE) or Before Common Era (BCE) are alternative terms that are more acceptable to people of other faiths.

The first period of the Church was one of persecution, as Christians under the Roman Empire fulfilled the message of Jesus to spread his message to all
nations. Following the conversion of the Emperor Constantine in 312 CE, the Edict of Milan in 313 enabled Christians to practise their faith openly, free from persecution. Constantine established a capital, Constantinople (now Istanbul), in the eastern part of the Empire and organised a great Church Council at Nicaea. The Council met seven times between 325 and 387 CE to develop the Church’s administration and liturgy.

The Church was organised into regional communities called Patriarchates, with a senior bishop holding the title of Patriarch. Apart from Rome and Constantinople, other influential patriarchates were Alexandria, Antioch and Jerusalem.

Eastern Christianity as we know it today is the result of three major splits from the early unified church. Two of these splits took place in the 5th Century CE and the third, known as the Great Schism, in the 11th Century CE.

The Assyrian Church of the East

The Assyrian Church of the East, based in Persia, was the first to break away in 431 CE after the third Ecumenical Council, the Council of Ephesus. The Church recognises only the first two Ecumenical Councils, and does not recognise any of those that followed.

In addition to the doctrinal issues, another factor in the breakaway was the Persian Christians’ need to distance themselves from the official church of the Roman Empire, with which Persia was frequently at war. In this way they were able to maintain their Christian faith while avoiding suspicions that they were collaborating with the Roman enemy.

The Church of the East was always a minority in Persia, but it flourished for many centuries and expanded through missionary activity into India, Tibet, China and Mongolia.

After the area was conquered by Muslim Arabs, the Church diminished, and was further weakened by the formation of a Catholic counterpart known as the Chaldean Catholic Church. World War I and the aftermath of the British withdrawal from Iraq in 1933 led to reprisals against Assyrians in Turkey and Iraq, which resulted in the Assyrian Patriarch seeking exile in the United States.

The Church was split in the 1960s by a dispute about the hereditary succession of Patriarchs. The two opposing sides have held recent meetings, but the rift has not yet been healed. In recent times the Church has also sought closer ties with the Chaldean Catholic and Roman Catholic churches.

The Oriental Orthodox Churches

This was the next church to break away, in 451. Like the Assyrian Church of the East, which broke away as a result of the third Ecumenical Council, the Oriental Orthodox Churches’ breakaway can be traced back to the fourth Ecumenical Council, the Council of Chalcedon. As such, the Churches are also referred to as Non-Chalcedonian and the Old Oriental Churches.
The rejection of the Council of Chalcedon and the subsequent split was due to arguments of Christology – how the divine and human nature of Jesus is regarded. This issue was a major factor in the Assyrian Church’s breakaway 20 years earlier.

It is commonly accepted today that the differences between the Oriental Orthodox and those churches that accept Chalcedon are only verbal and that both profess the same faith in Christ using different formulas.

In the period following Chalcedon, those who rejected the Council’s teaching made up a significant portion of the Christians in the Byzantine Empire. Today, however, they are greatly reduced in number. Some of these churches have existed for centuries in areas where there is a non-Christian majority, and more recently have suffered from many decades of persecution by communist governments.

**The Eastern Orthodox Churches**

Following the disintegration of the Roman Empire, there was no longer a unifying political regime or administration. The Western Empire was conquered and dismembered by various non-Christian tribes, making communication difficult.

Meanwhile the Eastern (Byzantine) Empire continued to flourish for some time. Travel difficulties and ignorance of the other’s language (the Western Church’s dominant language was Latin, while in the East it was Greek), hindered serious discussion between Rome and Constantinople, and this affected Church relations.

For 500 years after the first two breakaways from the unified church, the Chalcedonian churches of East (Constantinople) and West (Rome) maintained a somewhat fragile union.

Finally, a dispute arose concerning the authority of the senior patriarchate in Rome to decide matters for the whole Church on the basis that Rome was the most honoured and respected capital, and it was there that the apostles Peter and Paul had been martyred. This and other differences with respect to church administration and creed led to a rift between Constantinople and Rome and ultimately to the separation of the Eastern (Orthodox) Church from the Western (Roman Catholic) Church in 1054 CE (the Great Schism).

The rift was perhaps most seriously expressed during the fourth Crusade in 1204 CE, when French, Venetian and German Crusaders sacked and pillaged Constantinople and the Christian Orthodox and Jewish communities on their way to combat the Muslim (infidel) conquerors of the Holy Land.

The development of the Western Church, from which the majority of Christian Churches in Australia have evolved, is perhaps better known than that of the Eastern, largely Orthodox, Church.

Following the death of Prophet Muhammad in 632 CE and the Islamic conquest of much of the Middle East, North Africa and parts of Spain, the boundaries of the Byzantine Empire were severely reduced and the most important
patriarchates of the Eastern Orthodox Church – Constantinople, Jerusalem and Antioch – came under Muslim rule.

The Orthodox were able to worship as before, but without civil or political power, until the decline of the Islamic empire in the seventh and eighth centuries when missionary activity brought Serbia, Russia and Bulgaria into the Orthodox Church.

The organisation of the early Orthodox Church was retained through the patriarchs of its various communities (often national) being linked by similar liturgy and meeting in council to clarify and proclaim the Church’s teaching.

In 1453 CE, the Ottoman Turks conquered Constantinople and the unity of the Eastern Church under Constantinople was broken. Bulgaria, Serbia, Romania, Albania and Greece also fell to the Ottomans and their Orthodox Churches existed individually under Muslim rule until the 19th century.

The lack of a single authority within the Eastern Church over such a long period, and the reduced opportunity to debate or implement change, contributed to the survival of the Orthodox Churches with little change through five centuries.

The Eastern Catholic Churches

The split between Rome and Constantinople saw much missionary activity in the east by the Roman Catholic Church. This led to the formation of Eastern Catholic Churches, which recognized the jurisdiction of Rome but maintained their own traditions.

Eventually, segments of nearly all the Eastern churches came into union with Rome. In the process of coming under the jurisdiction of Rome, many Eastern Catholic churches lost contact with their roots, a situation they have recently begun to address. Many Orthodox churches see the presence of these churches as an obstacle to reconciliation with the Catholic Church as they came about from efforts to split Orthodox communities.

Each Eastern Catholic patriarchal church has the right to choose its own Patriarch, but they remain under the jurisdiction of the Pope.

The Eastern Protestant Churches

The various Orthodox and Catholic Churches of the Middle East can trace their origins from the early history of the Christian Church in which the region played such a significant role. Protestant Churches of the Middle East have a more recent origin from western Protestant missionaries who travelled to the Middle East last century following the decline in power of the Ottomans.

While the Christian Church is somewhat different today, its members believe it witnesses the same truths and is inspired by the same Spirit as the early Christian Church.
Characteristics of Eastern Christian Churches

It is difficult to generalise about the range of Eastern Christian Churches, but some features can be identified that relate to the culture of the region and the close link with the early Christian Church. These include the following:

- most of the churches use services that are centuries old, though these vary in the way they are performed
- singing is generally unaccompanied and people generally stand grouped together in fellowship during the services
- men and women segregate more often than in western churches, perhaps due to the cultural influence of Judaism where men and women gather separately in sacred buildings. The early Christian tradition, evidenced in one of the oldest Christian churches, Hagia Sophia (Holy Wisdom) in Constantinople (completed in 537 CE), had areas for women upstairs and men downstairs
- the influence of Byzantine and Islamic art is appreciable in many Eastern Church buildings
- Holy Week and Easter services are, by far, the most significant times in the religious calendar for most Christians of Eastern Churches. Christmas does not assume the importance it does in many Western Churches.

Population: Christian denominations in Australia

In the 2001 Australian census, almost 12.8 million people stated they were Christians.

Christianity arrived in Australia with European settlement in 1788 and quickly became the dominant religious faith in the country. But this categorisation disguises a wide range of beliefs and organisational structures, with dozens of different denominations included under this heading.

In 2001, the largest single denomination was the Western or Roman Catholic Church, with almost 5 million adherents. There were 3.9 million Anglicans, 1.2 million Uniting Church and 624,887 Presbyterians. Although much smaller than the major Christian denominations, churches from the Middle East, such as the Melkite (3,082, a 339% increase) and Maronite Catholic (31,770, a 124% increase) and the Antiochian Orthodox, (7524, an 89% increase) were the fastest growing.

Over half-a-million Australians identified with one of the Orthodox faiths, with by far the largest being the Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of Australia. Other national Orthodox churches with significant numbers include the Macedonian, Serbian and Russian. There are also 18,000 Australian members of the Coptic Orthodox Church. The first Orthodox service in Australia took place at Sydney's Kirribilli Point during Easter 1820. The first Orthodox Church in Australia, 'Holy Trinity', was opened in the Sydney suburb of Surrey Hills in 1898, built by a small number of people from various Orthodox backgrounds.

(Adapted from Religious Diversity, You, Me, Australian, Living in Harmony)
Middle Eastern Christian settlement in Australia

The first wave of migrants from Lebanon commenced around 1880, although there were some earlier arrivals. These early immigrants were known as Syrians but they were classified as Turks by the colonial governments of the day. The area now known as Lebanon was still under Ottoman control.

Early immigrants from Lebanon (around 1880) were Christians including Maronites, Orthodox and Melkites. A small number of Druze settled in South Australia. In Australia, many Lebanese Christians supported the existing Orthodox and Catholic communities. The first Melkite Church was established in 1895, the first Maronite Church in 1897 and the first Orthodox Church in 1901.


Considerations for schools

Although CASES 21 does not collect information on religion of students, it is important that the school is aware of religious beliefs and practices for observant students of different religions.

Dietary practices and laws vary with different branches of Christianity. Some Christians fast and abstain from certain foods at significant times during the year. These could be marked on the class calendar and other staff alerted to avoid such activities as sausage sizzles, overnight camps, strenuous sports and the usual canteen orders.

Do you know the religious backgrounds of your students and the shades of difference even within a faith?

Christians from Eastern Catholic and Orthodox churches may follow the Julian calendar rather than the Gregorian one, so children may be absent from school to attend, for example, Easter services, when Easter on the two calendars does not coincide.

Name days are more important than birthdays for communities of many Eastern Churches. These are celebrated on the day of a saint after whom the child is named.

In the Classroom

Arrange visits to Eastern churches in your community and have a church member available to explain the features of the Church and the services held.

Have students interview someone from a different religious community. Devise interview questions that will bring out religious practices, their beliefs and the importance of their religion in their lives.
Set group assignments for students to research similarities and differences among Christian Churches (particularly those represented in the local community) under headings appropriate for their age level. Local or visiting members of Churches may agree to be interviewed.

Compare the rituals and celebrations of different denominations for Holy Week and Christmas.

Develop a thematic study of time and calendars, the history and background of the Gregorian and Julian calendars, the contribution of Arabic astronomers, calendars of other religions and the significance of the sun and moon in our measurement of time.

Investigate the stories of the saints after whom students are named and family and religious naming traditions.

Prepare and make posters illustrating the significance of religious artefacts and traditions in homes, such as icons, votive lamps, crucifixes, prayer, rituals and ceremonies.

Compare the “rules” of different religions. Discuss areas of commonality and difference. Use graphic organisers, e.g. Venn diagram, adapted from *The Really Big Beliefs Project* (PDF, 50KB) (http://www.asiaeducation.edu.au/bigbeliefsbook/pdf/lesson6.pdf).

Devise other activities suggested in *The Really Big Beliefs Project* (http://www.asiaeducation.edu.au/bigbeliefsbook/activities.html)

**Bibliography**
