

Academic Accommodations for Religious Observances

University of British Columbia, Okanagan

Preamble:

This resource is intended to support instructors in responding to requests for religious accommodations. It complements, but does not replace, UBC policy. In the event of any discrepancy, official policy remains the authoritative source.

Summary:

Instructors are expected to consider all requests in good faith, with the understanding that there is no “one-size-fits-all” approach—even among students who share the same religion. Accommodations should respond to individual needs. This resource offers practical steps for instructors, clarifies responsibilities around in-term and final exam accommodations, and highlights available supports. It encourages thoughtful, flexible responses that uphold both academic integrity and students’ sincerely held beliefs.

Policy Background:

At UBC Okanagan, we celebrate the diversity of all our members. This diversity includes our religious, cultural, and spiritual beliefs and observances—and the right to practice them. [Policy J-136](#) requires that reasonable academic accommodations be provided to students related to religious observances. Related UBC policies include [Policy SC-7](#) against discrimination, and provincial laws such as the BC Human Rights Code.

Religious Observances:

Religious observances are expressed in many ways, including through personal values, clothing, dietary choices, and designated times for prayer or reflection. This resource focuses on two common forms of observance—religious feasts and fasts—since they often require academic accommodations due to their timing, duration, or impact on energy, focus, or availability.

Religious Feasts:

Religious feasts are observances that may include both spiritual practices and cultural expressions. While they are rooted in religious significance such as prayer, ritual, and reflection, they may also be accompanied by community gatherings, meals, and celebrations that reflect cultural traditions.

In Canada, major Christian feast days such as Christmas and Easter are recognized through statutory holidays, and are provided for with societal accommodations. Other religious feasts might not align with public holiday schedules. Below are some examples of religious feasts observed by students in our community. Please refer to the [Multifaith Calendar](#) for an expanded list.

Eid al-Fitr, Eid al-Adha and other Islamic Feasts (Islam)

Eid al-Fitr marks the end of Ramadan and is celebrated with communal prayers, festive meals, and gift-giving. Families often prepare sweets and special dishes, and it is customary to give to charity (*zakat al-fitr*). *Eid al-Adha*, the Festival of Sacrifice, commemorates the story of Abraham's devotion to God and includes prayer, sacrifice (or charitable donations in its place), and feasting.

Diwali, Holi and other Hindu Feasts (Hinduism)

Diwali symbolizes the victory of light over darkness and knowledge over ignorance. Observers light *diyas* (lamps), exchange gifts, and prepare sweet and savory foods. *Holi*, the festival of colors, is a springtime celebration of renewal, marked by vibrant color throwing (symbolising spring), music, and community feasting.

Pesach, Purim, and other Jewish Feasts (Judaism)

Pesach commemorates the liberation of the Israelites from slavery in Egypt. It involves a ceremonial meal called the *Seder*, featuring symbolic foods and storytelling. *Purim* celebrates the story of Esther and is marked by costumes, music, and shared food baskets (*mishloach manot*).

Vesak and other Buddhist Feasts (Buddhism)

Vesak honors the birth, enlightenment, and passing of the Buddha. Observers often gather for temple services, acts of generosity, and vegetarian meals. The day may include candlelight processions, prayers, and reflective teachings.

Naw-Rúz and other Bahá'í Feasts (Bahá'í)

Coinciding with the spring equinox, *Naw-Rúz* marks the Bahá'í new year. It is a time of renewal, and is often celebrated with joyful gatherings, music, and shared meals. There are eight other holy days in the Bahá'í faith (for example, the Declaration of the Báb) where observers are required to suspend work.

Gurpurabs, Vaisakhi, and other Sikh Feasts (Sikhism)

Sikh celebrations often center around *Gurpurabs*—commemorations of the births or martyrdoms of the Sikh Gurus. These are marked by prayers, hymn singing (*kirtan*), processions (*nagar kirtan*), and communal meals (*langar*), which are open to all. One of the most significant feasts is *Vaisakhi*, celebrating the formation of the Khalsa in 1699. It is both a religious and cultural festival, observed with gatherings, food, music, and acts of collective service (*seva*).

Religious Fasts:

Religious fasts are observed in many traditions. While some faiths, like Sikhism, discourage ritualised fasting, others view it as a meaningful practice tied to spiritual reflection, moral discipline, and sacred remembrance.

Many religious fasts follow lunar calendars rather than the Gregorian calendar—meaning their timing may shift from year to year. One of the most well-known examples of this is *Ramadan*, a month of fasting, prayer, and reflection for Muslims.

Fasting practices vary greatly. Some involve refraining from food and water, while others may emphasize simplicity, solitude, and prayer. At UBC Okanagan and across Kelowna's diverse community, students may observe a range of religious fasts throughout the academic year. Please refer to the [Multifaith Calendar](#) for an expanded list. They include:

Lent (Christianity)

Observed by many Christian denominations, Lent is a 40-day period of spiritual reflection, self-discipline, and preparation in the lead up to Easter. Contemporary observations of Lent include abstaining from specific foods (e.g: meat and treats), entire meals, behaviours (e.g: refraining from unkind words), or activities (e.g: fasting from 'doom-scrolling' through social media or single use plastics).

Ramadan (Islam)

Ramadan is a time of heightened spiritual reflection for Muslims. Many engage deeply in reading the Qur'an, performing additional prayers, and committing to acts of charity and self-discipline. Central to its observations, is fasting from dawn (*suhoor*) to sunset (*iftar*), during which participants abstain from food, drink (including water), and other physical needs. The daily rhythm also includes nightly prayers (*taraweeh*), which often extend late into the evening, and a pre-dawn meal typically eaten about an hour before sunrise.

The duration and timing of the fast varies by geography. In Kelowna, where seasonal daylight shifts are pronounced, fasting hours can range significantly—from approximately 8:00 a.m.—5:00 p.m. in winter, to 2:00 a.m.—9:00 p.m. in summer.

Maha Shivratri and other Hindu Fasts (Hinduism)

Hinduism has a number of fasts throughout the year. *Maha Shivratri* is an annual festival marked by fasting, prayer, and night-long worship. Some observers abstain from all food and water (*nirjala fast*), while others consume light, sattvic foods. Devotees often stay awake through the night, engaging in prayer and meditations. Other important fasts include *Navaratri*, a nine-night festival celebrated twice annually, where devotees fast partially or fully during the daytime.

Uposatha and Buddhist Meditation Retreats (Buddhism)

Many Theravāda Buddhists observe *Uposatha* days—periods of intensified spiritual practice marked by fasting after noon, increased meditation, and ethical reflection. Some observers may also participate in multi-day retreats that include fasting, silence, and limited technology use.

Yom Kippur and Other Jewish Fasts (Judaism)

Yom Kippur is the holiest day in the Jewish calendar. Observers engage in a full 25-hour fast from food and drink, along with prayers and reflection. Other fasts, such as Tisha B'Av, also involve food abstention and spiritual focus.

19-Day Fast (Bahá'í)

Unlike the other examples in this section, the *19-Day Fast* happens each year from March 1 – 19. Bahá'ís rise before dawn to eat and pray, then abstain from food and drink until sunset. The Fast is a time for spiritual reflection and a conscious effort to detach from material concerns.

Paryushana and Extended Fasts (Jainism)

Fasting is central to Jain practice, particularly during *Paryushana*, an 8–10 day festival of self-discipline and spiritual renewal. Devotees may undertake partial or complete fasts (including water-only) for one or several days.

Students who observe religious fasts may experience changes in their daily rhythms and routines, including shifts in sleep, energy, focus, and availability. Depending on the spiritual tradition, fasts may involve physical abstinence (from food and even water), increased prayer, and night-time worship—all of which can impact academic participation and performance.

Some common effects of fasting include:

- *Reduced energy and concentration*, particularly in the afternoon or early evening, due to prolonged fasting or limited hydration.
- *Disrupted sleep schedules*, especially when observances involve late-night or early-morning prayers, which may make early morning exams or classes more challenging.
- *Scheduling conflicts* with classes, labs, or exams due to prayer times or key religious dates.
- *Emotional or spiritual strain*, especially when academic expectations overlap with meaningful religious observances. Some students have likened writing exams on sacred days to writing an exam on Christmas Day.

By creating space for flexibility and dialogue, faculty can help reduce unnecessary stress and affirm the university's respect for religious diversity and student well-being.

Non-Academic Accommodations:

Non-academic accommodations are provided by UBC's support services. These include access to faith representatives and spiritual advisors, on-campus prayer spaces and ablution stations, culturally and religiously appropriate food options, and events that reflect the religious diversity of our campus community.

Students are encouraged to get in touch with their [Faith Club](#) for information about on-campus events, and with *Spiritual and Multifaith Services* (faith.spirituality@ubc.ca) to learn more about non-academic accommodations.

Academic Accommodations:

Academic accommodations are provided by instructors and must be assessed on a case-by-case basis. They are not granted if they result in undue hardship such as compromising the academic integrity of the curriculum or the standards of a course.

Below are examples of accommodations that have been implemented at UBC. The list is not exhaustive, but it illustrates the range of possibilities, and that even modest measures can have a meaningful impact when offered in consultation with students.

- Allowing brief breaks during classes, labs, or exams for students to discretely break their fast with a small snack or say a prayer
- Making lecture recordings or alternative participation methods available
- Providing additional time during exams for students to break their fast, pray, or perform ablutions
- Offering flexible attendance options for classes or labs to accommodate scheduling conflicts with prayer
- Extending deadlines for graded assignments during fasting periods or religious observances
- Offering deferred exams or other ways of testing a student's knowledge so they can participate in their faith and also learn course material.

When considering an accommodation, instructors are encouraged to reach out to their Department Head or Associate Dean to ensure consistency with your unit's procedures for considering and/or approving an accommodation for in-term or final exams.

Tips for Addressing Accommodations in the Classroom:

1. *Be proactive.* Students don't always know about religious accommodations—especially for those who may be navigating faith-based needs for the first time in a university setting. Consider a brief mention in your syllabus or first class that UBC Okanagan supports religious accommodations, and that students should reach out early to discuss their requests for accommodation. This helps students plan ahead and fosters a learning environment where they feel seen, supported, and respected.
2. *Plan ahead.* UBC's [Multifaith Calendar](#) is a useful resource for identifying days of religious significance. Keep in mind that many observances follow lunar or lunisolar calendars and may shift from year to year. This means that the 2025 Multifaith Calendar will differ from future years. If you're unsure about a specific tradition, reach out to the *Equity and Inclusion Office* or *Spiritual and Multifaith Services*.
3. *Be timely.* Some students have shared that delays in responses have resulted in them missing the window for an accommodation, and having to make difficult decisions between honouring their faith and meeting academic milestones. Acknowledging requests promptly and initiating necessary consultations early helps ensure that accommodations are meaningful, actionable, and supportive of student success. A student's faith matters to them—as does your response.
4. *Communicate clearly.* Once the student and instructor agree on an accommodation plan, capture it in writing and send it to the student. This helps ensure transparency and prevents miscommunication. If any changes arise to the accommodation plan, inform the student.
5. *Exercise flexibility.* Fasting, prayer, and other observances affect students differently depending on personal, cultural, and intersectional factors such as disability, caregiving responsibilities, or

other identity-based needs. One student's experience of a religious practice may look very different from another's—even within the same tradition.

6. *Avoid assumptions.* It's natural to approach accommodation requests through the lens of one's own experiences but it's important to remember that not everyone practises faith in the same way. Just because a practice isn't familiar, or differs from how one might observe a tradition, doesn't mean it's invalid. Avoid gatekeeping based on assumptions about what is "typical" or "reasonable." The duty to accommodate is based on sincerely held beliefs, not on personal agreement with it. Approach each request with openness and cultural sensitivity.
7. *Be open and collaborative.* It can be daunting for students to ask for accommodations in a secular academic setting. When they do, listen openly and ask how you can best support them. Students often have thoughtful suggestions. Your role is not to assess their faith, but to find reasonable ways to meet their needs, if possible, without compromising academic integrity or standards.
8. *Leverage your network.* You don't need to navigate accommodation requests alone. In addition to central supports, you can consult your Associate Dean Academic, Associate Dean Students, or colleagues within your Faculty. Always ensure student confidentiality when seeking advice.

Common Questions about Religious Accommodations:

1. *What is considered to be religious or spiritual observance?*

Religious and spiritual observances may include, but are not limited to: prayer, religious services, ceremonies, and rituals. If an observance overlaps with an academic commitment, UBC Okanagan has a duty to accommodate the student without penalty, as long as doing so does not cause undue hardship such as compromising the academic integrity of the curriculum, the academic standards of the course, or the safety of the student or others.

A person with a sincerely held religious belief is entitled for consideration for accommodations, regardless of whether their belief is shared by others. The duty to accommodate extends beyond mainstream and well-known religions.

2. *Are students required to provide proof of their beliefs?*

No. Students are not required to provide evidence of their membership in a religious or spiritual tradition, nor do they need to justify their observance when requesting accommodations. They are also not required to provide letters from faith or spiritual leaders. It would go against UBC policy and BC human rights legislation for faculty to request proof of religious adherence or to evaluate the validity of a student's beliefs.

3. *Do all members of the same faith practice in the same way?*

No. Religious traditions are personal and individual, and assumptions about an individual's faith cannot be based on their country of origin. Furthermore, members of the same religion may observe different practices or cultural expressions. For example, within the exact same religion, some individuals may request time off while others may not, and still others may not observe the tradition at all. Given the diversity of religious practice, the focus should not be on validating a request, but in considering how it can be reasonably accommodated.

4. *What is the process to request an Academic Accommodation?*

Please refer to the [Academic Accommodation for all Students Religious Observances and for the Cultural Observances of First Nations, Metis, and Inuit Students](#)

Resources on religious days:

UBC's [Multifaith Calendar](#) identifies a non-exhaustive list of religious days that members of our community might commonly request an accommodation.

Contact *UBCO's Equity and Inclusion Office* or *Spiritual and Multifaith Services* if you would like to learn how a day of religious significance may impact an individual's request for a religious accommodation.

- Equity and Inclusion Office: humanrights@equity.ubc.ca
- Spiritual and Multifaith Services: faith.spirituality@ubc.ca

Contact *Indigenous Programs and Services* to learn how you can support Indigenous spiritual practices.

- Indigenous Programs and Services: indigenous.programs@ubc.ca

Resources on religious accommodations:

- *Students* requiring more information about religious accommodations, including the process and timelines for making requests, can review UBC's Senate Policy on [Academic Accommodation for all Students Religious Observances and for the Cultural Observances of First Nations, Metis, and Inuit Students](#)
- *Staff and faculty* seeking information about how they can request a religious accommodation from UBC, including processes and timelines, can review [Accommodations of Religious Observations](#)