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Race Unity Day

Race Unity Day (called “Race Amity Day” until 1965) was inaugurated in 1957 by the National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá’ís of the United States (US-NSA), the annually elected governing council of the American Bahá’í community, to promote racial harmony and understanding. While it is a Bahá’í-sponsored occasion, it is not a Bahá’í holy day (nor is it even a “religious” event), yet is observed worldwide as an outgrowth of Bahá’í principles of interracial harmony and as an outreach to the wider community to foster a warm embrace of the social fact of ever-increasing diversity. For instance, a “National Race Amity Conference” was held on June 10–12, 2011, at Wheelock College in Boston, culminating in the first Boston Race Amity Day Celebration on Rose Fitzgerald Kennedy Greenway on June 12. William “Smitty” Smith, EdD, executive director of Wheelock’s National Center for Race Amity, has sent to all members of the U.S. Congress a proposed Joint Resolution of Congress to “[d]eclare the 2nd Sunday in June annually be designated as National Race Amity Day.”

Although not a “holy day” in the formal sense, Race Unity Day may be seen as contributing to what some scholars call “civil religion” as part of shared cultural values that progress over time. Although the term “civil religion” is commonplace among scholars of religion, the term “civil religious holy day” may be an apt neologism by which to characterize Race Unity Day as a cultural event, in which the sacred Bahá’í values of unity are secularized and thereby transposed into the civic sphere.

Like World Religion Day, another observance conceived and “invented” by the US-NSA, as it were, this community event is universal in that it is not specifically a “Bahá’í” observance, but can be more widely appreciated and participated in. As an US-NSA-inspired “civil religious holy day” (to use the author’s term), Race Unity Day has apparently provided a model that appears to have inspired its secular namesake, sponsored by the government of New Zealand.

Usually celebrated annually on the second Sunday in June in the United States, Race Unity Day events have, not infrequently, been accompanied by mayoral proclamations. One of the early observances of Race Amity Day was in San Antonio, Texas, where the event was reported by the *San Antonio Register* on June 6, 1958. Today, Race Unity Day events in the United States are typically the product of local community initiatives, rather than a response to direct encouragement from the National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá’ís of the United States.

On June 6, 2010, for instance, Bahá'ís in Springfield, Illinois, cosponsored the 13th annual "Race Unity Rally" at the state capitol. This celebration included performances by the Kuumba Dancers, Bahá'í African American drummers, and other musicians. Children were publicly recognized as winners in the sixth annual Vision of Race Unity Art and Poetry Contest. The 2010 event was cosponsored "by Frontiers International Club of Springfield, Women's International League for Peace and Freedom, the Greater Springfield Baha'i community, the First Presbyterian Church of Springfield, the Dominican Sisters of Springfield, and Springfield's Lincoln Library."

The 32nd Annual Race Unity Day, sponsored by the Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, was held on June 13, 2010, at the City Island Pavilion to "promote religious, racial, and cultural harmony." In Burke, Virginia, the 14th annual "Race for Race Unity 5M" took place that Sunday in Burke Lake Park in order to raise funds for "Health for Humanity" (a humanitarian organization that provides training for health professionals in emerging and developing countries through partnerships with existing health institutions around the world).

The Blount County Race Unity Day was held at the Everett Center in Maryville, Tennessee. The Bahá'ís of Savannah, Georgia, had their annual Race Unity Picnic on June 13, 2010. In Erie, Pennsylvania, the "Race Unity Picnic" at Presque Isle State Park was cosponsored "by members of the Baha'i Faith in the Erie area along with the Race Unity Dialogue Group and Amerimasala Committee." The same day, the Bahá'ís of Rapid City, South Dakota, had their annual "Oneness of Humanity—Race Unity Day" potluck picnic at Canyon Lake Park, while the Bahá'ís of Fargo, North Dakota, hosted their annual Race Unity Day at Rabanus Park. These are some of the reported Race Unity Day events across the United States.

As previously stated, Race Unity Day was called "Race Amity Day" from 1957 to 1965. "Race amity" was a general expression, during the Jim Crow era, for harmonious race relations. The early American Bahá'ís took a leadership role in promoting "race amity" to the fullest extent possible, including advocating interracial marriage for those who wished to so marry. This was quite radical at that time, since antimiscegenation laws prohibiting interracial marriage existed in many states until they were declared unconstitutional by the Supreme Court in 1967.

The first Bahá'í-sponsored "Race Amity Conference" was organized by Agnes S. Parsons (a white woman prominent in Washington, D.C., high society) at the instruction of 'Abdu'l-Bahá (1844–1921; successor to, interpreter, and exemplar of the teachings of the prophet-founder of the Bahá'í Faith, Bahá'u'lláh [1817–1892]), who, in 1920, said to her: "I want you to arrange in Washington a convention for unity between the white and colored people." This came as a shock to Mrs. Parsons, who had no prior experience in race relations.

'Abdu'l-Bahá advised Parsons not to undertake this activity alone. Accordingly, Parsons consulted with the Washington, D.C. Bahá'í Assembly for advice and called upon several of her friends to form an ad hoc race amity convention committee. Among those whose help she solicited were Howard University professor Alain Locke (1885–1954), who joined the "Bahá'í Cause" (as the Bahá'í Faith was then

known) in 1918, and Louis G. Gregory (1874–1951), a law graduate of Howard University, who was widely known as a lecturer and writer on Bahá'í topics.

The historic “Convention for Amity Between the Colored and White Races Based on Heavenly Teachings” took place on May 19–21, 1921, at the First Congregational Church in Washington, D.C. Alain Locke chaired the Friday evening, May 20, session, and Louis Gregory was one of a number of speakers—of both races and varied religious backgrounds—who addressed the convention.

Although Locke was not widely known as a professing Bahá'í, he contributed significantly to the Bahá'í “race amity” efforts. Of Locke, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. said, in his speech at the Poor People’s Campaign Rally on March 19, 1968 in Clarksdale, Mississippi: “We’re going to let our children know that the only philosophers that lived were not Plato and Aristotle, but W. E. B. Du Bois and Alain Locke came through the universe.”

Locke, who devoted his life and career to fostering interracial unity, wrote in 1933: “If they will but see it, because of their complementary qualities, the two racial groups [black and white] have great spiritual need, one of the other.” As Locke said in a speech in 1944: “Just as world-mindedness must dominate and remould [*sic*] nationmindedness, so we must transform eventually race-mindedness into humanmindedness” (see Locke, “Stretching Our Social Mind,” *World Order* 38, no. 3 [2006–2007]: 30). These statements fairly characterize the Bahá'í perspective on interracial unity, more broadly stressed as the “consciousness of the oneness of humankind.”

The success of the Race Amity Convention in Washington led to a series of similar events over the next several years in Springfield, Massachusetts; New York City; and Philadelphia. Beginning in 1927, Bahá'í-sponsored events promoting interracial harmony proliferated, spreading to many cities, large and small, and to other regions of the United States, and sometimes involving collaboration with the Urban League or the NAACP. Louis Gregory came to play a central role in organizing these events in the period from 1927 to 1947. He set a standard that Bahá'ís continued to emulate throughout the last half of the 20th century.

“The Vision of Race Unity: America’s Most Challenging Issue,” the 1991 statement by the National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of the United States on what Bahá'ís call “America’s most challenging issue” (i.e., racial discrimination), together with the video *The Power of Race Unity* broadcast on the Black Entertainment Network and across the country in 1997, has its roots in early Bahá'í race-relations endeavors.

In a letter dated January 14, 1987, to the National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of the United States, the Universal House of Justice (international governing council of the Bahá'í Faith, first elected in April 1963 and elected every five years by NSA members worldwide) called for a continuation of the “race amity” efforts which, after all, were called for by none other than ‘Abdu’l-Bahá:

[T]he House of Justice appreciates the attention you are attempting to give to this situation by your appointment each year of a Race Unity Committee;

however, it has noticed that ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s advice concerning the holding of Race Amity Conferences is not being systematically followed. You are asked, therefore, to give the most careful consideration to reviving the Race Amity Conferences as a regular feature among the activities of your national community. (Taylor, *Pupil of the Eye*, 178–79)

In its letter of April 10, 2011, the Universal House of Justice (administrative authority, elected every five years, of the worldwide Bahá’í community), has emphasized the altered dynamics of prejudice today: “The expressions of racial prejudice have transmuted into forms that are multifaceted, less blatant and more intricate, and thus more intractable.” Because the current Bahá’í emphasis is on neighborhood outreach with devotional meetings, study circles, children’s classes, and junior youth events, Race Unity Day is not presently promoted in Bahá’í communities in the United States, although the U.S. NSA was a major sponsor (along with the *Boston Globe*) of the June 2011 National Race Amity Conference in Boston. Consequently, Race Unity Day may take on a life of its own in the secular sphere, much like World Religion Day, but with continued Bahá’í support at the local level. Although observance of Race Unity Day in the United States has often been replaced by a variety of activities aimed at promoting social unity with a broader focus, it is flourishing now in New Zealand, where it takes place annually in March. This “Race Unity Day,” however, is a New Zealand cultural event rather than a Bahá’í-sponsored event, although local Bahá’í communities certainly involve themselves with local Race Unity Day events as promoters and providers of activities. This includes Bahá’í cosponsorship of the annual “Race Unity Speech Awards,” popular among secondary school students, a competition that is now a joint venture between the Bahá’ís and the New Zealand Police (who furnish the awards money).

“Race Unity Day 2010,” held in Nelson, New Zealand, on March 21, is a notable instance of the practice of the Race Unity Day model. Officially sponsored by the Nelson Multicultural Council, it was a hugely successful event that enjoyed official and popular support. Bahá’í involvement is formally seen in the “2010 Race Unity Speech Award,” which is “sponsored by the New Zealand Bahá’í Community and proudly supported by the Human Rights Commission, the New Zealand Police and the Office of Ethnic Affairs.”

Race Unity Day events in New Zealand, although government-sponsored, are openly cosponsored by the Bahá’ís, among other groups, in what appears to be a phenomenon of joint community efforts. For instance, the Race Unity Day in Whangarei, New Zealand, on March 21, 2009, was “a successful Race Unity Day organised by Settlement Support, the Baha’i community and English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) home tutors Northland at Hurupaki Primary School” (Ali, “Why Whangarei Enjoys a Degree of Racial Tolerance”).

Whatever the future may hold for Bahá’í-sponsored “Race Unity Day” events or “Race Amity Conferences,” the emphasis on the oneness of humankind will

continue to animate Bahá'í efforts to bridge the racial divide in bringing about harmony among races, nations and religions. As in the case of New Zealand, the model that the Bahá'ís pioneered is taking root across the globe, as racial reconciliation emerges as a self-evident social imperative. As such, the trajectory of Race Unity Day phenomenologically maps the transition from sacred to secular values.

Race Unity Day is not only about promoting racial amity, but “[i]t’s about empowering people,” according to a Bahá'í organizer of the 2008 event in San Antonio, Texas, where a diverse mix of entertainment included traditional East Indian dance, a “Christian praise dance,” Negro spirituals and country music, following San Antonio city council’s proclamation declaring Saturday, March 21, 2008, “Race Unity Day.” (Ayo, “Race Unity Day Empowers People Personally, Socially.”) As a Bahá'í-inspired “civil religious holy day,” Race Unity Day quickens the civic heart by fostering the social empowerment that interracial harmony engenders.

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See also ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, Ascension of; Ayyám-i-Há (Bahá'í Intercalary Days); Bááb, Festival of the Birth of the; Bááb, Festival of the Declaration of the; Bááb, Martyrdom of the; Bahá'í Calendar and Rhythms of Worship; Bahá'í Faith; Bahá'í Fast; Bahá'u'lláh, Ascension of; Bahá'u'lláh, Festival of the Birth of; Covenant, Day of the; Martin Luther King Jr., Birthday of; Naw-Rúz, Festival of; Nineteen-Day Feast (Bahá'í); Ridván, Festival of; World Religion Day.

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Radhashtami

The Radhashtami festival is a Vaishnava Hindu celebration of the birthday of the deity Radha, the consort of Krishna. She is a major character in the Bhagavada opurana and the Gita Govinda (or Song of Govinda), a work composed by the 12th-century poet Jayadeva. She is most often pictured standing beside Krishna.

In the story of Krishna, as related, for example, in the *Mahabharata*, he spends much of his youth in the village of Vrindavan in northern India, in the company of gopis, young girls who herd cows. These times are described in some detail in Bhagavata Purana. Radha is not mentioned by name in the Bhagavata Purana, though it seemingly alludes to her. Her story is focused upon later in the Gita Govinda, where her life is related in more detail. Krishna is seen as an incarnation of the deity Vishnu and Radha of Lakshmi.

Krishna was born at a time when his uncle King Kamsa sought his death, as Krishna (the eighth son born to Kamsa’s sister) was predicted to kill him. In the process of Kamsa’s searching out the baby Krishna, Radha and the other gopis were taken by the Putana demon. Krishna killed the demon, and the gopis were retrieved and placed in various homes. Radha was given to Brishabanu Maharaja and subsequently grew up in his palace in Barshana.

Within the Vaishnava tradition, Radha is held up for her unconditioned love for Krishna. The 13th-century Vaishnava theologian Nimbarka advocated a form of piety built around the devotion to and worship of Krishna and Radha, pictured as surrounded by thousands of gopis in a celestial Vrindavan. This devotion would be developed by the Bengali saint Chaitanya Mahaprabhu (1486–1534) in the 16th century. Chaitanya is believed by the followers of Gaudiya Vaishnavism, best known in the West from the International Society for Krishna Consciousness, to be the full incarnation of both Lord Krishna and Radha.

Vaishnavas celebrate Radha on Radhashtami, which is held on the eighth day of the waning moon of the Hindu lunar month of Bhadrapad (August–September on the Common Era calendar). It is a fast day that begins with a ritual bath. At the temple, Radha’s statue will be bathed with panchamrita—a food mix, made of honey, sugar, milk, yogurt, and ghee, that has a variety of uses in Hindu