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RELIGIOUS CELEBRATIONS

AN ENCYCLOPEDIA OF HOLIDAYS, FESTIVALS, SOLEMN
OBSERVANCES, AND SPIRITUAL COMMEMORATIONS

Volume 1



Religious Celebrations

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A–K

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A

‘Abdu’l-Bahá, Ascension of (November 28)

The Ascension of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, like the Day of the Covenant (November 26), is a Bahá’í holy day honoring ‘Abdu’l-Bahá (1844–1921), who succeeded Bahá’u’lláh (1819–1892), prophet-founder of the Bahá’í Faith, and led the Bahá’í community from 1892 to 1921. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá fulfilled a triple role, in that he was not only Bahá’u’lláh’s designated successor, but was authorized by Bahá’u’lláh as the inerrant interpreter of the latter’s teachings and was also regarded as the paragon, or perfect exemplar, of Bahá’í ethics, virtues, and wisdom.

The Ascension of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá commemorates the death—and, retrospectively, the life—of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, who passed away quietly in his home on November 28, 1921, in Haifa, Palestine (now Israel), at the age of 77. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá was well known in Palestine and abroad. One instance of this will illustrate the point: Immediately upon learning of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s death, Winston Churchill, then British secretary of state for the colonies, telegraphed to the High Commissioner for Palestine, Sir Herbert Samuel, who was the highest-ranking official in the country, instructing him to “convey to the Bahai Community, on behalf of His Majesty’s Government, their sympathy and condolence on the death of Sir ‘Abdu’l Bahá ‘Abbas.” Here, reference to the title “Sir” refers to the knighthood of the British Empire that was conferred on ‘Abdu’l-Bahá at a ceremony in the garden of the military governor of Haifa on April 17, 1920, for ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s humanitarian work in Palestine during World War I.

Arrangements for the funeral were made by ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s sister, Bahíyyih Khánum. The funeral procession for ‘Abdu’l-Bahá took place on November 29, 1921. An estimated 10,000 townspeople joined together in the procession, acclaimed as the largest and most memorable funeral event the city of Haifa had seen. The casket was carried from ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s house, at the foot of Mount Carmel, to a garden facing the Shrine of the Báb, approximately midway up the northern slope of Mount Carmel. The procession itself took two hours for the casket to be carried a distance of just under a mile. Describing the procession, Shoghi Effendi (1898–1957), grandson of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá and the Guardian of the Bahá’í Faith (1921–1957), wrote, in part:

The coffin containing the remains of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá was borne to its last resting-place on the shoulders of His loved ones. The cortège which preceded it was led by the City Constabulary Force, acting as a Guard of Honor,



'Abdu'l-Bahá. (National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of the United States)

behind which followed in order the Boy Scouts of the Muslim and Christian communities holding aloft their banners, a company of Muslim choristers chanting their verses from the Qur'án, the chiefs of the Muslim community headed by the Muftí, and a number of Christian priests, Latin, Greek and Anglican. Behind the coffin walked the members of His family, the British High Commissioner, Sir Herbert Samuel, the Governor of Jerusalem, Sir Ronald Storrs, the Governor of Phoenicia, Sir Stewart Symes, officials of the government, consuls of various countries resident in Haifa, notables of Palestine, Muslim, Jewish, Christian and

Druze, Egyptians, Greeks, Turks, Arabs, Kurds, Europeans and Americans, men, women and children. The long train of mourners, amid the sobs and moans of many a grief-stricken heart, wended its slow way up the slopes of Mt. Carmel to the Mausoleum of the Báb (Shoghi Effendi, *God Passes By*, 313).

At the funeral ceremony itself, nine eulogies, eloquent and moving, were given by dignitaries representing the Muslim, Christian, and Jewish communities. The Mufti of Haifa, Shaykh Muḥammad Murád, lamented the loss of Haifa's great benefactor: "Abdul-Baha was great in all the stages of his life. He was genius itself, high in character and had the best reputation. . . . To whom shall the poor now look? Who shall care for the hungry? and the desolate, the widow and the orphan?" (See Bagdadi, *Star of the West* [1922]; and Balyuzi, *'Abdu'l-Bahá*, 466–72.) 'Abdu'l-Bahá had great compassion for the poor and ministered to their needs practically every afternoon of his life in Haifa, even on his wedding day.

Bahíyyih Khánum opened 'Abdu'l-Bahá's Will and Testament to see if it contained any instructions for the burial. Since no specific instructions were given, she decided to inter him in a place of enduring honor. 'Abdu'l-Bahá's casket, after mourners had paid their respects, was interred in the Shrine of the Báb, in a vault beneath the floor of the north central room, next to the very room where the Báb's remains are entombed.

The governor of Jerusalem, Sir Ronald Storrs, commented: "I have never known a more united expression of regret and respect than was called forth by

the utter simplicity of the ceremony.” Sir Herbert Samuel wrote: “A great throng had gathered together, sorrowing for his death, but rejoicing also for his life” (Shoghi Effendi, *God Passes By*, 312).

For several days after, some 50 to 100 of the poor were fed each day at ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s house, culminating, on the seventh day, in a mass distribution of grain. On the 40th day after ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s passing, a memorial feast was held in accordance with Muslim customs, and additional eulogies were given.

Obituaries were published in major newspapers in the Middle East, Europe, the United States, and India, such as: *Times* (London), November 30, 1921 (“‘Abdul Baha was a man of great spiritual power and commanding presence and his name was held in reverence throughout the Middle East and elsewhere”); *New York World*, December 1, 1921; *Daily Mirror*, December 2, 1921; *Le Temps*, the leading French paper, December 19, 1921; *Times of India*, January 1922; and others. Locally, the Haifa newspaper, *Annafir* (December 6, 1921), published an obituary that carried the headline: “The Most Great Calamity—The Departure of the Personification of Humanitarianism, Abdul-Baha Abbas” (Bagdadi, *Star of the West*, 259–67).

The term “Ascension,” of Christian origin, is a reverential term, implying that the person referred to, by virtue of a high spiritual station, “ascended” to heaven and dwells in Paradise. For Bahá’ís, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, although not a prophet, occupied a unique and pivotal station.

At such commemorations, Bahá’ís typically gather together in an assembly hall or private home (depending on the size of the local Bahá’í community) and, in a dignified atmosphere, respectfully recite or chant prayers and passages from the sacred Bahá’í Writings. A special “Prayer revealed by ‘Abdu’l-Bahá and now recited by his loved ones at his hallowed shrine” was translated by Shoghi Effendi in January 1922. This “Tablet of Visitation” for ‘Abdu’l-Bahá captures the quintessence of his character, expressed in this supplication: “Lord! Give me to drink from the chalice of selflessness; with its robe clothe me, and in its ocean immerse me.” For Bahá’ís, this prayer is especially significant by virtue of this promise preceding the prayer: “Whoso reciteth this prayer with lowliness and fervor will bring gladness and joy to the heart of this Servant; it will be even as meeting Him face to face” (*Bahá’í Prayers*, 234).

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See also Ayyám-i-Há (Bahá’í Intercalary Days); Báb, Festival of the Birth of the; Báb, Festival of the Declaration of the; Báb, 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; Naw-Rúz, Festival of; Nineteen-Day Feast (Bahá’í); Race Unity Day; Ridván, Festival of; World Religion Day.

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Abhidhamma Day

Abhidhamma Day is a Theravada Buddhist celebration observed primarily in Myanmar (Burma) that has grown out of a tradition concerning the origins of the Abhidhamma, a major segment of the Pali Canon, the holy texts of Theravada Buddhism. The Abhidhamma literature is a collection of commentaries on the sutras, the books generally believed to be the discourses of the Buddha. One tradition suggests that the Abhidhamma developed when the Buddha visited his deceased mother in Tusita heaven and taught her about the Dharma, during the Rainy Season Retreat (Vassa Retreat) seven years after his enlightenment. He did this each night, and during the next day, he repeated the same teachings to Sariputra. Sariputra memorized and recited the entire comments to his disciple, who in turn passed them down generation by generation until they were recited at the Third Council of Buddhism, held at Pataliputra in 251 BCE. At that time, all seven books were recited accurately by Revata, and then later put in written form.

According to this tradition, following his enlightenment, the Buddha was filled with compassion for the various deities (*devas*) and brahmas were believed to dwell there. By this time, his mother, who had passed away shortly after his birth, had been reborn in the Tusita heaven, one of the heavenly realms in Buddhist cosmology. There she was now known as Santusita Deva. He thus went to the celestial abode and preached the Abhidhamma to both his mother and the assembly of the heaven’s divine and semi-divine beings. The preaching activity continued for three months.

When the Buddha completed his work in heaven, he asked permission of the king of the celestial realm to return to his work in the human realm. On hearing this, the king made available three stairways, one made of silver, one of gold, and one of ruby.

Awwal Muharram. See New Year's Day

Ayyám-i-Há (Bahá'í Intercalary Days) (February 25–March 1)

Most religions have a season of gift-giving and good cheer, and for Bahá'ís, this is “Ayyám-i-Há” (“Days of Há”; February 25–March 1, sunset to sunset). The observance of “Ayyám-i-Há” is creatively expressed. For instance, in 2007, the Bahá'í community in Hamilton, Ontario, Canada, hosted their 40th annual “Ayyám-i-Há tea party” which Mayor Fred Eisenberger and Member of Parliament David Sweet attended—even though this was a decidedly nonpolitical event. (Bahá'ís shun partisan politics, which they see as divisive). (See “Bahá'í Intercalary Days Time of Fellowship, Charity; Party Is Now a 40-year-old Community Tradition,” *Ancaster News*, March 23, 2007, 11.) This is just one example of how “Ayyám-i-Há” may be celebrated. It is also a day of service to the wider community, as the examples provided below show.

So what is “Ayyám-i-Há”? The Bahá'í Calendar is made up of 19 months of 19 days each, which totals 361 days (see “Bahá'í Calendar and Rhythms of Worship”), to which are added four (or, in leap years, five) “Intercalary Days” (the other name by which Ayyám-i-Há is known), to harmonize with the 365-day (366 in leap years) solar year. Thus Ayyám-i-Há is a Bahá'í festival that serves calendrical and community purposes. This season of joy and giving precedes a 19-day period of restraint and contemplation known as the Bahá'í Fast (March 2–20, sunset to sunset), in which Bahá'ís abstain from food and drink from sunrise to sunset. (See “Nineteen-Day Feast [Bahá'í].”) Bahá'u'lláh (1817–1892), prophet-founder of the Bahá'í Faith, ordained Ayyám-i-Há as follows:

O Pen of the Most High! Say: O people of the world! . . . Let the days in excess of the months be placed before the month of fasting. . . . It behoveth the people of Bahá, throughout these days, to provide good cheer for themselves, their kindred and, beyond them, the poor and needy, and with joy and exultation to hail and glorify their Lord, to sing His praise and magnify His Name . . . Thus hath it been ordained by Him Who is the Lord of all mankind. (Bahá'u'lláh, *The Kitáb-i-Aqdas*, 24–25)

As this passage of Bahá'í scripture indicates, this time of festivity (“good cheer”) is not only to have a good time, but to do some good at the same time, by giving to the less fortunate. It is a time of both cheer and charity, in which reaching out to those in need enriches the quality of this time and renders it all the more worthwhile.

The numerical (*abjad*) value of the Arabic/Persian letter “Há” is five, which corresponds to the potential number of intercalary days. The Bahá'í Writings attach symbolic significance to the letter “Há,” which represents, *inter alia*, the mysterious and transcendent “Essence” of God. Since the days and months of the Bahá'í

calendar are named after some of the “attributes” of God, the “Days of Há” may symbolize the transcendence of the essence of God over the attributes of God, which represent the “nature” of God as manifest in creation, and as perfectly manifested in the “Manifestations of God.” This is a Bahá'í term for the great prophets and messengers of God, including, *inter alia*, Abraham, Moses, Zoroaster, Buddha, Jesus, Muhammad, the Báb, and Bahá'u'lláh, whom Bahá'ís recognize as great God-inspired truth-bearers and lawgivers in their respective religious eras.

Thus, Ayyám-i-Há can signify the “Days of God” and are thus invested with spiritual meaning beyond their pragmatic calendrical function, where symbolism and celebration go hand in hand. As one report stated: “Ayyám-i-Há can be thought of as days outside of time, days that symbolize eternity, infinity and the mystery and unknowable Essence of God Himself.” (“‘Days Outside of Time’ Festival Reveres Eternal Essence of God” [2008].)

Shoghi Effendi (Guardian of the Bahá'í Faith, who led the Bahá'í world from 1921 to 1957 and who furthered the development of the system of elected councils at the local, national, and international levels that administer Bahá'í affairs today), wrote: “As regards the celebration of the Christian Holidays by the believers, it is surely preferable and even highly advisable that the friends should in their relation to each other discontinue observing of such holidays as Christmas and New Year’s, and to have their festal gatherings of this nature instead during the intercalary days and Naw-Rúz.” (From a letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to an individual believer, March 19, 1938; cited in *Lights of Guidance*, 302.) In practical terms, young Bahá'í children in cultures where the celebration of Christmas is pervasive may be inclined to view Ayyám-i-Há as “Bahá'í Christmas,” as it is most likely a time when they will receive gifts from family and friends. In turn, Bahá'í parents often find this a good time to strengthen the children’s identity as Bahá'ís, by holding Ayyám-i-Há parties to which they can invite their friends and celebrating it with their classmates at school when possible. A Bahá'í children’s book, *The Ayyám-i-Há Camel*, shows one family’s way of personalizing the holiday: inventing an “Ayyám-i-Há Camel” to represent the gift-giving nature of this Bahá'í festival.

Bahá'ís celebrate Ayyám-i-Há worldwide, since the Bahá'í Faith has been established in every country in the world, except for the Vatican and North Korea, making it the second-most widespread religion in the world today, next to Christianity. Among the world’s six million Bahá'ís, Ayyám-i-Há traditions are highly diverse and “in the making.” In 2008 in Zambia, for instance, one Bahá'í blogger posted: “Last Friday we had an Ayyám-i-Há party with the children’s classes. We had a treasure hunt, a piñata, a water balloon fight and some arts+crafts! The kids had so much fun.” (Karrie, “Service in Zambia,” online at <http://serve-zambia.blogspot.com>.) Bahá'í families and communities are to remain free to creatively express their observance of this occasion, so as to avoid creating hard-and-fast customs or rituals.

Some other examples of ways in which Ayyám-i-Há has been celebrated include: sending “Ayyám-i-Há cards” to friends and family; having an annual

family “Ayyám-i-Há dinner”; organizing treasure hunts for Bahá'í children and their friends; bringing small presents to a Bahá'í child's kindergarten classmates and organizing an edible art activity; giving children an “Ayyám-i-Há present” on each day of the four or five days; hanging “Ayyám-i-Há stockings”; baking “Ayyám-i-Há cookies” (in the shape of a nine-pointed star, a symbol of the Bahá'í Faith); making Bahá'í prayer beads; decorating the home with nine-pointed stars; making “Ayyám-i-Há banners” with pockets for small gifts; having a community bowling party or pancake party; etc.

As for Ayyám-i-Há charity and service projects, these examples are representative: organizing a food drive or hunger relief for donating food to local food banks; paying surprise visits to friends or home-bound acquaintances, with heartwarming displays of friendship and songs; visiting people in hospitals and homes for the aged; providing crafts activities for residents at nursing homes; giving gift packages to people at homeless shelters; and so forth.

In 2008 in Malaysia, for instance, the Local Bahá'í Youth Committee of Kuching organized a blood donation campaign at the Kuching Bahá'í Centre in Malaysia. In 2007, the Bahá'ís joined with Temple Israel, a conservative synagogue in Albany, New York, in co-organizing a multicultural music and dance concert in the majestic sanctuary at Temple Israel on February 25, 2007, during which \$1,701.50 was raised among the some 200 attendees and donated to the Food Pantries for the Capital District. In 2003 in Singapore, Bahá'ís observed Ayyám-i-Há with a blood donation drive, followed by a picnic for families in a beachside park. Recently, “home visits” seem to be a popular mode of service among Bahá'ís.

There is a special Bahá'í prayer for Ayyám-i-Há (found in most Bahá'í prayer books), and in which these blessings are invoked:

I implore Thee, O Thou the King of kings and the Pitier of the downtrodden, to ordain for them the good of this world and of the world to come. Write down for them, moreover, what none of Thy creatures hath discovered, and number them with those who have circled round Thee, and who move about Thy throne in every world of Thy worlds. (Bahá'u'lláh, *Bahá'í Prayers*, 236–37)

Here, God is represented as “the Pitier of the downtrodden,” which makes the one who is praying mindful of those who are less fortunate, and of the need to reach out to make this world a better place. For Bahá'ís, personal salvation is bound up with social salvation, in that personal transformation is dynamically related to the efforts a person makes to transform society. The Bahá'í Intercalary Days are therefore all about good cheer, hospitality, and doing good for others, when celebrations and service go hand in hand.

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See also ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, Ascension of; Báb, Festival of the Birth of the; Báb, Festival of the Declaration of the; Báb, 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; Naw-Rúz, Festival of; Nineteen-Day Feast (Bahá'í); Race Unity Day; Riḍván, Festival of; World Religion Day.

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B

Báb, Festival of the Birth of the (October 20)

The Festival of the Birth of the Báb is one of five Bahá'í festivals and one of the nine Bahá'í holy days on which work is to be suspended. Sayyid 'Alí Muḥammad of Shiraz, known by his spiritual title as “the Báb” (“the Gate”), was born on October 20, 1819, in Shíráz, Persia (now Iran). The Báb was the founder of a 19th-century new religious movement generally known as Bábism, the substance of which was transformed into what is now known as the Bahá'í Faith.

The Báb declared himself to be the long-awaited Qá'im (“Ariser”/“Resurrector”), the expected eschatological deliverer (known in Sunni Islam as the “Mahdí”), who, according to Islamic tradition, would come to revive Islam when it is at its lowest ebb. While proclaiming himself to be an independent “Manifestation of God,” the Báb also spoke of the imminent advent of the Promised One, or “Him whom God shall make manifest.” One of the Báb's followers, Bahá'u'lláh (1817–1892), would later receive revelations confirming that he was that Promised One heralded by the Báb.

According to Armin Eschraghi, the Báb established a new Faith that fulfilled all the criteria of an independent religion: a new founder, newly revealed scriptures, a new set of metaphysical and theological teachings distinct from those of Islam, and new religious laws and principles. In revealing his new code of laws (called the *Bayán*), the Báb pursued three major goals: (1) paving the way for the advent of the Promised One; (2) provoking the clerical establishment and shattering the foundations of their often-abused institutionalized authority; and (3) proving the independence of his own religion as distinct from Islam.

Soon after the Báb publicly proclaimed his prophetic mission beginning on the evening of May 22, 1844, the Persian government began to suppress the movement, and violence ensued. The Báb was arrested and executed by a firing squad of 750 musketeers on July 9, 1850, in Tabríz, Persia. Subsequent to an unauthorized and ill-fated attempt on the life of the Sháh of Persia in 1852, the Sháh ordered the most brutal tortures and deaths of a great number of Bábís, with estimates ranging from around 5,000 to 20,000 martyrs, who, as Browne described it, were subjected to “[t]errible . . . modes of inflicting death. . . . Of the unfortunate Bábís, some were hewn in pieces, some were sawn asunder, some were flayed with whips, some were blown from the mouths of mortars” (Browne, “Bábíism,” in *Religious Systems of the World*, 348).

In the fall of 1852, arrested in the wake of this brutal persecution, Bahá'u'lláh was imprisoned in the notorious Siyáh-Chál (“Black Pit”), during which time he experienced a series of visions that awakened him to his prophetic destiny. He was released but banished, exiled successively to Baghdad (1853–1863), Constantinople/Istanbul (1863), Adrianople/Edirne (1863–1868), and thence to the prison-city of ‘Akká, the vilest penal colony of the Ottoman Empire. In 1892, Bahá'u'lláh passed away in Bahjí, near ‘Akká in Palestine (now Israel).

In his article on “Bábíism” published that same year, Browne wrote: “I say nothing of the mighty influence which, as I believe, the Bábí faith will exert in the future, nor of the new life it may perchance breathe into a dead people; for, whether it succeed or fail, the splendid heroism of the Bábí martyrs is a thing eternal and indestructible.” The “Bábí faith” that Browne spoke of was succeeded by the Bahá'í Faith, which has since spread worldwide to become the most widely diffused world religion next to Christianity, according to the 2001 *World Christian Encyclopedia*.

Today, Bahá'ís accept the Báb as a John the Baptist figure, whose words and actions heralded the arrival of Bahá'u'lláh, but also as the cofounder of the Bahá'í Faith. Unlike John the Baptist in relation to Jesus Christ, the Báb revealed much in substance, both in terms of doctrine and religious laws, that was subsequently revoiced and reenacted, with certain revisions, by Bahá'u'lláh.

Although the Báb did not instruct his followers to formally observe the day of his birth, for that occasion, Bahá'u'lláh had revealed the Lawḥ-i Mawlúd, which awaits an authorized translation. Today, Bahá'ís worldwide annually celebrate the Birth of the Báb on October 20 as a holy day, with work and school suspended for the day. There being no required observances, Bahá'ís are free to creatively organize commemorative activities, which, although attended mostly by Bahá'ís, are open to people of all faiths and persuasions.

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See also ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, Ascension of; Ayyám-i-Há (Bahá'í Intercalary Days); Báb, Festival of the Declaration of the; Báb, 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; Naw-Rúz, Festival of; Nineteen-Day Feast (Bahá'í); Race Unity Day; Riḍván, Festival of; World Religion Day.

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Báb, Festival of the Declaration of the (May 23)

The Festival of the Declaration of the Báb is one of five Bahá'í festivals, and nine Bahá'í holy days on which work is to be suspended. This holy day commemorates and celebrates the prophetic mission of the Báb, whose short-lived faith-community, the Bábí religion, was succeeded by the Bahá'í Faith, and whose doctrines—as well as several significant religious laws and observances—were taken up in the Bahá'í religion, effectively making the Báb “the martyr Prophet and co-founder of their Faith” (Shoghi Effendi, *Unfolding Destiny*, 233) alongside its principal founder, Bahá'u'lláh.

The Báb (1819–1850), whose given name was Sayyid ‘Alí-Muḥammad of Shiraz, was the precursor and herald of Bahá'u'lláh (1817–1892), whose given name was Mírzá Ḥusayn-‘Alí Núrí. The Báb’s relation to Bahá'u'lláh is somewhat analogous to John the Baptist’s role as the precursor and herald of Jesus Christ. By “Declaration” is meant two things: (1) the Báb’s announcement of his prophetic mission; and (2) the moment when the Báb’s first disciple, Akhúnd Mullá Ḥusayn Bushrú’í (1813–1849), recognized the Báb’s prophetic mission and became the first believer. Thus, the Declaration of the Báb took place on the evening of May 22, 1844. The signal moment was 2 hours and 11 minutes after sunset, as the Báb himself states, in *Persian Bayán* 2:7 and 6:13, and also in the *Kitáb-i Panj Sha‘n* (“Book of [the] Five Modes [of Revelation]”), revealed exactly six lunar years later, on March 19, 1850.

The Declaration of the Báb is one of the “two Most Great Festivals” which, in the words of Bahá'u'lláh, prophet-founder of the Bahá'í Faith, is “that day on which We [Bahá'u'lláh] raised up the One [the Báb] Who announced unto mankind the glad tidings of this Name [Bahá'u'lláh], through which the dead have been resurrected and all who are in the heavens and on earth have been gathered together” (Bahá'u'lláh, *Kitáb-i-Aqdas*, 59 [brackets added]). The Declaration of the Báb actually falls on the Gregorian calendar date of May 22 in the evening (i.e., 2 hours and 11 minutes after sunset), but since the Bahá'í day begins at sunset on what would normally be regarded in the West as the evening before May 23 (i.e., on the evening before the Muslim lunar date of Friday, the fifth day of Jamádíyu'l-Avval AH 1260 or May 23, 1844). Thus, the Declaration of the Báb is formally listed as May 23, even though it is observed on the evening of May 22.

The other “Most Great Festival” is the 12-day “Festival of Riḍván” (April 21–May 2). What the two “Most Great Festivals” have in common is that they commemorate the prophetic declarations of the “Twin Founders” of the Bahá'í Faith,

the Báb and Bahá'u'lláh. Of the two festivals, the Festival of Riḍván (“Paradise”) is preeminent (i.e., the “King of Festivals”), since the Báb not only declared his own prophetic mission, but heralded the imminent advent of a messianic figure referred to as “Him Whom God shall make manifest,” whose subsequent appearance, as Bahá'u'lláh, the majority of the Báb's followers (known as “Bábís”) later accepted.

Historically, the Declaration of the Báb is to be understood within the context of 19th-century Persia (now Iran). Messianic fervor had been ignited across Persia over the expected return of the Twelfth Imam, who was said to have disappeared in the Islamic year of 260 AH and who had gone into occultation for a period of 1,000 lunar years. Thus, in the Islamic year 1260 AH (1844), Persia was charged with what scholars call “eschatological tension.” The Báb declared that his appearance signaled the return of the Twelfth Imam. In each succeeding year of his short mission, the Báb advanced progressively greater prophetic claims. During the last three years of his ministry and prior to his martyrdom on July 9, 1850, the Báb declared that his real station was not only that of the (return of) the Twelfth Imam, but also a new Prophet and “Manifestation of God,” empowered to abrogate the laws of Islam and to reveal a new set of divine laws in their stead.

Although several accounts present different versions of the event, the one that is the most widely accepted is, briefly, as follows: In Persia, two influential theologians, Shaykh Aḥmad Aḥsá'í (d. 1826) and his successor, Sayyid Kázim Rashtí, proclaimed the imminent return of the Imam Mahdí. (“Mahdí” is a religious term identical to the “Qá'im” in Shi'í Islamic eschatology.) Before Sayyid Kázim died in 1843, he instructed his disciples to scatter in search of the promised Mahdí, who would soon be revealed. One of the more impressive young Shaykhís, Mullá Ḥusayn, had traveled to the Persian city of Shíráz and was mysteriously drawn to a young merchant, Sayyid 'Alí-Muḥammad of Shiraz, who invited Mullá Ḥusayn to his home that night, May 22, 1844. Of that momentous experience, Mullá Ḥusayn recounts:

When I first started upon my quest, I determined to regard the two following standards as those whereby I could ascertain the truth of whosoever might claim to be the promised Qá'im. The first was a treatise which I had myself composed, bearing upon the abstruse and hidden teachings propounded by Shaykh Ahmad and Sayyid Kázim. Whoever seemed to me capable of unravelling the mysterious allusions made in that treatise, to him I would next submit my second request, and would ask him to reveal, without the least hesitation or reflection, a commentary on the Súrih of Joseph, in a style and language entirely different from the prevailing standards of the time. . . .

I was revolving these things in my mind, when my distinguished Host again remarked: “Observe attentively. Might not the Person intended by Sayyid Kázim be none other than I?” I thereupon felt impelled to present to Him a copy of the treatise which I had with me. “Will you,” I asked Him, “read this book of mine and look at its pages with indulgent eyes? I pray you to overlook my weaknesses and failings.” He graciously complied with

my wish. He opened the book, glanced at certain passages, closed it, and began to address me. Within a few minutes He had, with characteristic vigour and charm, unravelled all its mysteries and resolved all its problems. Having to my entire satisfaction accomplished, within so short a time, the task I had expected Him to perform, He further expounded to me certain truths which could be found neither in the reported sayings of the imáms of the Faith nor in the writings of Shaykh Ahmad and Sayyid Kázim. These truths, which I had never heard before, seemed to be endowed with refreshing vividness and power. . . .

He then proceeded to say: “Now is the time to reveal the commentary on the Súrih of Joseph.” He took up His pen and with incredible rapidity revealed the entire Súrih of Mulk, the first chapter of His commentary on the Súrih of Joseph. The overpowering effect of the manner in which He wrote was heightened by the gentle intonation of His voice which accompanied His writing. Not for one moment did He interrupt the flow of the verses which streamed from His pen. Not once did He pause till the Súrih of Mulk was finished. I sat enraptured by the magic of His voice and the sweeping force of His revelation. At last I reluctantly arose from my seat and begged leave to depart. He smilingly bade me be seated, and said: “If you leave in such a state, whoever sees you will assuredly say: ‘This poor youth has lost his mind.’” At that moment the clock registered two hours and eleven minutes after sunset. . . .

“This night,” He declared, “this very hour will, in the days to come, be celebrated as one of the greatest and most significant of all festivals.” (Nabíl, *The Dawn-Breakers*, 57–61)

The preceding eyewitness account by Mullá Ḥusayn narrates the event of the Báb’s Declaration, but not its substance. What did the Báb announce? What did the Báb proclaim? The Báb called upon the kings and rulers of the earth to recognize the truth of his prophetic mission and to follow his religion. The Súrah of Mulk (“Chapter on Sovereignty”) states, in part:

O concourse of kings and of the sons of kings! Lay aside, one and all, your dominion which belongeth unto God.

O King of Islam! Aid thou, with the truth, . . . Him Who is Our Most Great Remembrance . . . and . . . subdue, with the truth and by His leave, the countries, for in this world thou hast been mercifully invested with sovereignty, and wilt, in the next, dwell, nigh unto the Seat of Holiness, with the inmates of the Paradise of His good-pleasure. (The Báb, *Selections from the Writings of the Báb*, 41–42)

“Verily, the essence of religion is none other than submission unto This Remembrance [the Báb]. Thus whoso seeketh Islam (submission to God), let him submit unto this Remembrance [the Báb]. For God will inscribe his

name in the Book of the Righteous as a true Muslim, and he will be praised as one who is faithful. Whoso rejecteth this true Islam, God shall not accept, on the Day of Resurrection, any of his deeds. . . .

We verily have moved the mountains upon the earth, and the stars upon the Throne, by the power of the one true God, around the Fire which burneth in the centre of Water, as ordained by this Remembrance. (Provisional translation by Saiedi, *Gate of the Heart*, 142 and 68 [brackets added])

The Báb claimed to fulfill the long-awaited return of the Twelfth Imam—who Shi‘i Muslims identified as the “Mahdī” expected by Sunni Muslims. This messianic figure, also known as the Qá‘im (“Ariser”/“Resurrector”) would appear at the end of the time, thereby marking the end of the Islamic dispensation. The Báb, at first, attracted a handful of disciples whose religion, in turn, rapidly attracted numerous followers across Persia, although the Bábí religion itself was quite short-lived. The Bábí movement thus emerged in the middle of the 19th century as the latest and most dramatic example of chiliastic/millenarian aspirations in modern Islam. The Báb’s claim of divine authority, and its ideological underpinnings, naturally challenged the finality of the Islam and hence aroused the opposition of the religious establishment.

The Báb had a cyclical view of history. Religions are divine in origin, yet, like spring and winter, seasonably have their rise and decline. Divinely revealed religions are, in their pure form, quintessentially harmonious and one in essence. In their heyday, religions are each suited to the needs of society in their particular day and age. When, in the course of social evolution, a religion becomes obsolete, it must be renewed and replaced by a new expression of divine Reality. Islam had run its course, and a new religion was on the horizon, with the Báb as the new messenger of God. These ideas, along with the Báb’s metaphorical interpretation of the Islamic Resurrection (*Qiyámat*), presaged the Bahá’í doctrine of “progressive revelation.”

Although, at first, the Báb’s claims and doctrines were couched in pious Islamic language, what the Báb went on to do was quite revolutionary. The Báb, according to Armin Eschraghi, established a new, post-Islamic faith that fulfilled all the criteria of an independent religion: a new founder, newly revealed scriptures, a new set of metaphysical and theological teachings distinct from those of Islam, and new religious laws and principles. In revealing his new code of laws as the *Persian Bayán* (1848), the Báb pursued three major goals: (1) paving the way for the advent of the Promised One; (2) provoking the clerical establishment and shattering the foundations of their often-abused institutionalized authority; and (3) proving the independence of his own religion as distinct from Islam.

The Bábí movement spread like wildfire across Persia during the period from 1845 to 1847. The Báb was imprisoned and, in the summer of 1848, a farcical trial took place that, by all accounts, was intended to humiliate the Báb. The Báb was bastinadoed and his imprisonment prolonged. Shi‘i clerics stirred up popular sentiment against the Bábís, who were attacked across Persia by various mobs. The

Bábís grouped to defend themselves in the fortress-shrine of Shaykh Tabarsí, and in Zanján and Nayríz. Clerics finally issued a death warrant, and the Báb was executed by a firing squad of 750 musketeers on July 9, 1850, in Tabríz, Persia.

After an ill-fated attempt on the life of the Sháh of Persia on August 15, 1852, by two aggrieved Bábí youths, the Sháh ordered the most brutal tortures and deaths of Bábís (and, subsequently, Bahá'ís), with estimates ranging from around 5,000 to 20,000 martyrs, who, as Browne described it, were subjected to “[t]errible . . . modes of inflicting death. . . . Of the unfortunate Bábís, some were hewn in pieces, some were sawn asunder, some were flayed with whips, some were blown from the mouths of mortars” (Browne, “Bábíism,” in *Religious Systems of the World*, 348).

The Declaration of the Báb inaugurated a process whereby a clear break from Islam was publicly taking place in Persian society, posing an immediate threat to the authority of the religious establishment, thereby unleashing the fury of the clerics and the rage of the state, plunging the Bábí (and, later the Bahá'í) community into a cauldron of unrelenting torture and horrific death. This period of intense persecution and martyrdom steeled the resolve of the faithful believers and was noised far and wide, such that the religion, far from being extirpated, attracted broadcast interest and spread far beyond the borders of Persia to emerge—in its final form as the Bahá'í Faith—as the second-most widespread religion in the world today in terms of global diffusion (in all countries except North Korea and the Vatican, surpassed only by Christianity).

Bahá'u'lláh has revealed several Tablets commemorating the Declaration of the Báb. One of the most well known is the “Tablet of the Eternal Youth” (*Lawh-i Ghulámu'l Khuld*), which is composed partly in Arabic—in rhythmic, rhymed prose, with short verses alternating with refrains—and partly in Persian. Revealed during the Baghdad period of Bahá'u'lláh's ministry (1853–1863), this Tablet explicitly commemorates the Declaration of the Báb. According to Walbridge's description, the gates of Paradise open wide to reveal a Youth of Paradise, who symbolizes the Báb. Standing before the gaze of the concourse of heaven, all are dazzled by the beauty of this Youth. The gates of Paradise then open a second time, wherein a luminous Maiden of Heaven appears, who is the personification of the spirit of Bahá'u'lláh's revelation. The denizens of heaven are awed by her beauty, by her song and by the lock of hair that slips from beneath her veil. She then stands before the Youth and lifts the veil from his face, whereupon the pillars of God's throne quake and tremble, and all creatures are struck dead. A celestial voice proclaims that the eyes of the ancients had longed to behold this Youth. The Youth then raises his eyes. With one word, he revives the spirits of the heavenly host. And by a single glance, the Youth restores the people of the earth—and then returns to Paradise. The Tablet closes in allegorical Persian, proclaiming to the peoples of the earth that the true morning of spiritual renewal has dawned, that the fire on Sinai is aflame once again, and that the celestial wine is flowing, for all to quaff. Ecstatic in tone, this Tablet appeals to all peoples to heed the call of the Báb, and hints of Bahá'u'lláh's own prophetic station as well. (Bahá'u'lláh

had not yet publicly declared that he was the Promised One foretold by the Báb.) The “Tablet of the Youth of Paradise” is melodically chanted at commemorations of the Declaration of the Báb and at other joyous occasions as well (Walbridge, *Sacred Acts, Sacred Space, Sacred Time*, 161–63).

The Declaration of the Báb, as previously mentioned, is observed in the evening of May 22, typically with readings and prayers as befit the occasion. Where Persian- and Arabic-speaking believers are gathered, the “Tablet of the Eternal Youth” (or another Bahá’í scripture revealed for this occasion) will be chanted. In a great many, if not most Bahá’í gatherings, Mullá Ḥusayn’s account, as recorded in Nabíl’s narrative, translated as *The Dawn-Breakers*, will be read, not as sacred scripture, but as sacred history. Prayers and readings are usually followed by refreshments and fellowship, and the rest of the holy day is observed as a day of rest from work during the day of May 23.

The two “Most Great Festivals” of the Bahá’í Faith are commemorations of the prophetic declarations of the “Twin Founders” of the Bahá’í Faith, the Báb and Bahá’u’lláh. Concomitant with the growth and development of the Bahá’í community worldwide, the Declaration of the Báb will likely emerge, in time, as one of the great religious festivals of the world’s religions.

Christopher Buck

See also ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, Ascension of; Ayyám-i-Há (Bahá’í Intercalary Days); Báb, Festival of the Birth of the; Báb, 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; Naw-Rúz, Festival of; Nineteen-Day Feast (Bahá’í); Race Unity Day; Ridván, Festival of; World Religion Day.

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Báb, Martyrdom of the (July 9)

The yearly commemoration of the Martyrdom of the Báb is one of the nine major Bahá’í holy days on which work is suspended. Observed by Bahá’ís in the Middle East on 28 Sha‘bán—in accordance with the Islamic lunar calendar—the occasion is annually observed on July 9 throughout the rest of the Bahá’í world. For many participants, it is a deeply moving experience.

Sayyid ‘Alí-Muḥammad of Shiraz (1819–1850)—known by his spiritual title as “the Báb” (“the Gate”) and regarded as the precursor and herald of Mírzá Ḥusayn-‘Alí Núrí, known as Bahá’u’lláh (the “Splendor” or “Glory of God,” 1817–1892)—was martyred on July 9, 1850, in Tabríz, Persia (now Iran). The circumstances of the Báb’s martyrdom, and its subsequent commemoration as a Bahá’í holy day, will be discussed below.

The Báb founded the 19th-century movement generally known as Bábism, an independent (albeit short-lived) religion that clearly broke from its parent religion, Persian (i.e., Twelver Shi‘i) Islam. As Orientalist Edward G. Browne observed regarding the Bábí phenomenon, “whatever its actual destiny may be, is of that stuff whereof world-religions are made.” As Browne predicted, the Bábí religion emerged as a “new world-religion” through its eventual transformation into what is now known as the Bahá’í Faith.

While the Bábí and Bahá’í religions are distinct, they are intimately related both historically and doctrinally. The writings of the Báb, for instance, are considered sacred scripture by all Bahá’ís. A number of the Báb’s religious laws were adopted and adapted by Bahá’u’lláh, as was the Badí‘ calendar (a solar calendar of

19 months of 19 days, each named after godly attributes to foster goodly virtues, which the Báb had created. Because the Báb and Bahá'u'lláh are so historically and doctrinally related, they are actually called the “Twin Founders” of the Bahá'í Faith.

According to Armin Eschraghi, the Báb established a new, post-Islamic faith that fulfilled all the criteria of an independent religion. These include a new founder, newly revealed scriptures, a new set of metaphysical and theological teachings distinct from those of Islam, new religious laws and principles. In revealing his new code of laws, the *Persian Bayán* (1848), the Báb intended to pave the way for the advent of the Promised One; to provoke the clerical establishment and shatter the foundations of their often-abused institutionalized authority; and to prove the independence of his own religion as distinct from Islam.

The Báb declared that he was a messenger from God sent to proclaim the imminent advent of one greater than himself. Religious and state persecution fell upon his followers, leading to the torture and religious martyrdom of thousands. In July 1848, the Báb was summoned to Tabríz to stand trial before Muslim clerics. Ordered by Ḥájí Mírzá Áqásí, prime minister of Persia, the trial was doubtless intended to publicly discredit the Báb. Presiding over the trial was the young Crown Prince, who later became the reigning monarch of Persia, Násiri'd-Dín Sháh. The Báb was pressured to recant his writings and claims.

Instead, the Báb openly proclaimed that he was the promised Qá'im, the expected deliverer in Shi'í Islam (and, as the Mahdí, by Sunni and Shi'í Muslims alike). To subject him to public ridicule by exposing his supposed ignorance, the Báb was then questioned about abstruse points of Arabic grammar, theology, and religious law. Throughout the course of the trial, the Báb staunchly refused to renounce his messianic claims and writings. After the trial reached its unsuccessful conclusion, the Báb was bastinadoed and again imprisoned. In their verdict, the clergy pronounced the Báb insane, thinking that a declaration of madness would quell the religious furor that the Báb had created.

However, a series of Bábí defensive clashes with the attacking state militias at Shaykh Tabarsí, Nayríz, and Zanján persuaded the new prime minister Mírzá Taqí Khán that the unrest would endure unless the Báb was put to death. The prime minister therefore ordered the execution of the Báb, who was then brought to Tabríz. When, at the house of Mullá Muhammad Mamaqání, the Báb still would not recant his claims, a leader of the Tabríz Shaykhís, Mamaqání, issued the Báb's death warrant by public execution at an army barracks in Tabríz.

Imprisoned with the Báb in the barracks cell were his secretaries, the two brothers Siyyid Hasan and Siyyid Ḥusayn Yazdí, along with a young Bábí mullá of Tabríz, Mírzá Muhammad-Alí Zunúzí, who was called Anís (“Companion”) by the Báb. Arrested for openly proclaiming the Báb's new religion, the young Anís refused to recant and so was sentenced to death with the Báb. The Báb chose Anís to die with him together as companion martyrs in a single execution, rather than in separate executions.

At noon, the Báb and Anís were brought out into the barracks square, and, bound by ropes, suspended from a spike driven into the wall of the barracks. The surrounding rooftops were thronged with an estimated 10,000 onlookers.

The Russian Armenian Sâm Khán commanded the Christian Bahádurán Regiment, which was ordered to carry out the execution. Although accounts of the Báb's execution vary in details, all agree that, after thick smoke—from the volley of 750 muskets—had cleared, the Báb had vanished, with Anís standing before the astonished multitude, unhurt. The Báb's escape from the first volley of musket fire is beyond doubt, as his ropes were cut by the shots. One witness to this extraordinary event, Sir Justin Shiel, Queen Victoria's Envoy Extraordinary and Minister Plenipotentiary, in Tehran on July 22, 1850, records:

The founder of this sect has been executed at Tabreez. He was killed by a volley of musketry, and his death was on the point of giving his religion a lustre which would have largely increased his proselytes. When the smoke and dust cleared away after the volley, Báb was not to be seen, and the populace proclaimed that he had ascended to the skies. The balls had broken the ropes by which he was bound, but he was dragged from the recess where after some search he was discovered and shot. His death, according to the belief of his disciples, will make no difference as Báb must always exist. (Momen, *The Bábí and Bahá'í Religions, 1844–1944*, 78)

A frantic search ensued, and the Báb was found back in his cell, evidently completing dictation to his secretary that was earlier interrupted. Soldiers swiftly cleared the barracks square, and the Báb was once more suspended by ropes for execution, with Anís placed in front of the Báb. But Sâm Khán refused to order his troops to fire again and so the Muslim Nádirí Regiment was summoned. On the second attempt, the Báb and Anís were instantly killed. Their bodies, in fact, were fused together by the sheer number of bullets that struck them.

Despite the claims of some two dozen Bábís in their rival bids to succeed the Báb, the majority of his coreligionists, the Bábís, turned to Bahá'u'lláh, who effectively led the Bábí community until such time as he formally established the Bahá'í religion in 1863 by his announcement that he was the messianic figure the Báb foretold, although the designation “people of Bahá” (i.e., followers of Bahá'u'lláh, the Bahá'ís), was not current until March 1866. In 1873, Bahá'u'lláh subsequently incorporated a number of the laws of the Báb, in modified form, in his book of laws, the *Kitáb-i-Aqdas* (“The Most Holy Book”).

Although not one of the holy days mentioned in the *Kitáb-i-Aqdas*, the martyrdom of the Báb was observed by Bahá'u'lláh. Two practices are associated with the observance of the Martyrdom of the Báb. First, commemorations should take place at noon, the time of the Báb's execution. Second, the “Tablet of Visitation”—a special commemorative prayer—is usually recited. Typically, it is Nabíl's narrative of the events surrounding the martyrdom of the Báb that is read

on this occasion, although it is not a requirement to do so. Nabíl's narrative, which describes the prophetic passion of the Báb's martyrdom in detail and is based on eyewitness accounts, is remarkably objective in style, yet never fails to stir deep emotions in the hearts of participants in this solemnly commemorative holy day.

Christopher Buck

See also 'Abdu'l-Bahá, Ascension of; Ayyám-i-Há (Bahá'í Intercalary Days); Báb, Festival of the Birth of the; Báb, Festival of the Declaration 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; Naw-Rúz, Festival of; Nineteen-Day Feast (Bahá'í); Race Unity Day; Riḍván, Festival of; World Religion Day.

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Babaji Commemoration Day (July 25)

In his autobiography, Paramahansa Yogananda (1893–1952) introduced his readers to a mysterious Indian saint known only as Mahavatar Babaji. Yogananda, one of the founders of Hinduism in North America, had been the student of Sri

mild compared to other similar groups. Much of the criticism grew from its advocacy of celibacy for its more committed full-time members.

J. Gordon Melton

See also Avatar Adi Da Samraj's Birthday; Bhumanandaiji Paramahansa, Birthday of Swami Guru; Muktananda, Birthday of Swami Paramahansa.

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Bahá'í Calendar and Rhythms of Worship

The Bahá'í calendar charts physical time, as do all calendrical systems, yet is additionally designed to inspire spiritual progress by associating time with the cultivation of human nobility. The precise name for the Bahá'í calendar is the Badí' (“Unique” or “Wondrous”) calendar. It originated with Sayyid 'Alí-Muḥammad of Shiraz (1819–1850), entitled the Báb (“the Gate”), who founded the Bábí religion, soon superseded by the Bahá'í Faith, established by Mírzá Ḥusayn-‘Alí Núrí (1817–1892), known as Bahá'u'lláh (a spiritual title meaning the “Splendor [or “Glory”] of God”). By adopting and modifying the Badí' calendar for use by the Bahá'í community, Bahá'u'lláh gave it formal sanction.

Time is invested with spiritual significance by the naming of weekdays, days of the month, months, years, and cycles of years after godly perfections that can be translated into goodly virtues, such as “Beauty” (Jamál) “Knowledge” ('Ilm), “Honor” (Sharaf), and “Grandeur” ('Azamat), which are names of 4 of the 19 Bahá'í months. These dynamic “names of God” each highlight a distinctive quality of sterling character and human nobility, in a process of transformation that may, to coin the present author's term, be called *theophoric metamorphosis*. Literally, the term “theophoric,” as its Greek root indicates, means “God-bearing.” Here, the “names” of God may be conceived of as “qualities” or, better still, as “powers” of God that can be potentially manifested by man (and, to a lesser degree, by each created thing when it reaches its potential state of perfection).

In the Báb's *Kitáb al-Asmá'* (“Book of [Divine] Names”), which exceeds 3,000 pages and is said to be “the largest revealed book in sacred history,” the Báb treats human beings as reflections of divine names and attributes (Saiedi, *Gate of the Heart*, 36). To the extent that a person is a “bearer” of one of the “names” (i.e., qualities or powers) of God, that individual is empowered to express that quality in human action. Through the progressive spiritualization of all persons—and, indeed, of all things—the Báb wished to transform all of reality into “mirrors” reflecting the perfections represented by these divine names.

Like other religious calendars, special holy days (such as the “Birth of the Báb” on October 20 and the “Birth of Bahá'u'lláh” on November 12) commemorate significant events in the history of the Bahá'í religion. These twin functions of meditation and commemoration combine to produce a means of reckoning and consecrating time in what is offered as a world calendar for future society, should all countries wish to adopt it.

The Báb established the Badí‘ calendar in several passages, particularly in the *Persian Bayán* 5:3, a volume he “revealed” (i.e., authored by divine revelation) around 1847, in which he stated:

The Lord of the universe hath fashioned all types of years by His behest, and hath ordained that . . . each year should equal the numerical value of the words “all things” (*kullu shay'*) [$19 \times 19 = 361$], to consist of nineteen months, where each month equalleth nineteen days, that from the moment of the rising of the sun in the vernal equinox—corresponding to the first sign of the Zodiac, the sign of Aries—till the end of its voyage at the end of winter—corresponding to the last sign of the Zodiac, the sign of Pisces—all beings may traverse through all the nineteen stages of the Letters of Unity.

The first month . . . resembleth the sun, while all other months resemble mirrors which reflect the radiant lights of that supreme month, in such wise that naught is seen in them but that month. God hath called that month the month of Bahá (Splendour, Glory), meaning that therein lieth the splendour and glory of all months, and He hath singled it out for Him Whom God shall make manifest. (Provisional translation by Saiedi, *Gate of the Heart*, 327–28)

Here, “all things” (*kullu shay'*) “signifies the new spiritual community which comes into being out of the unity of the Báb and His Letters of the Living [first 18 disciples]” (Saiedi, *Gate of the Heart*, 283).

Because the Báb’s style of discourse tends to be philosophically rarified and thus difficult to understand without the benefit of some explanation, a brief comment on the significance of the first month of the Badí‘ calendar will elucidate the position and preeminence of the name, “Bahá’.” The Báb singled out the word *váhid* (unity) as a symbol for the oneness of God. In Arabic reckoning (*abjad*), the numerical value of “*váhid*” (Arabic: *wāhid*) is 19. Thus, the number 19 is a Bábí and Bahá'í symbol for the unity of God. Using the number 19 as the basis of the Badí‘ calendar, the Báb drew the names of the 19 months from the *Du‘á al-Sahar*, an Arabic invocatory prayer attributed to Imam Mḥammad al-Báqir (d. 732 CE), the fifth of the Twelver Shi‘i Imams, recited at dawn by Shi‘í Muslims during the Fast of Ramaḍan. Both the sixth Shi‘i Imam, Ja‘far al-Šádiq (d. 765 CE) and the eighth Shi‘i Imam, Riḍá‘ (d. 818 CE), who transmitted this prayer, are said to have claimed that this dawn prayer contained the “Greatest Name” of God (*al-ism al-a‘zam*).

Bahá'u'lláh, in the Persian “Tablet of the Greatest Name,” cites the beginning of this dawn prayer, and observes that Muslims, despite the fact that certain Imams

indicated that the prayer contains the “Greatest Name” of God, remained oblivious to the positional preeminence of the word “Bahá’,” and thereby failed to divine this open secret. Instead of recognizing that Bahá’u’lláh was presaged in this prayer, several Shi’i clerics pronounced a death sentence on Bahá’u’lláh (which was never implemented).

The Báb specifically dedicates Naw-Rúz to “Him Whom God shall make manifest” (the promised messianic figure foretold by the Báb) and that, by naming the first day of each month of the Badí‘ calendar, “Bahá’,” and by naming the first month of each Badí‘ year, “Bahá’” (dedicated to “Him Whom God shall make manifest”), the Báb seems to imply that “Bahá’ ” (or Bahá’u’lláh) is this Promised One.

While the Báb’s theophoric naming conventions and system of aggregating years (i.e., tracking the spiritual names of weekdays, days of the month, months, and years within cycles of 19 and 361 years) remain intact in the Bahá’í Faith, the current practice is generally to simply number the years consecutively as the “Bahá’í Era” (“B.E.”) progresses. In Gregorian terms, the Bahá’í Era began on March 21, 1844. The Bahá’í epochal year of 1844 marks the year that the Báb founded the Bábí religion. Thus, 2010 is part of two consecutive Bahá’í years, in which the year 166 B.E. ended on March 20, 2010, and the new year, 167 B.E., commenced on March 21, 2010 (or, technically, on March 20, 2010, after sunset, since each new Bahá’í day begins after sunset).

The Badí‘ calendar is symmetrically composed of 19 months of 19 days, contemplatively named after divine attributes, with four (or, in a leap year, five) intercalary days, after the 18th month (in Bahá’u’lláh’s revision of the calendar) to round out the solar year. This calendrical symmetry is extended: not only are there 19 days per month and 19 months per year, but 19 years per cycle, and 19 cycles per major cycle, while conserving the traditional seven-day week (signaling a willingness to accommodate the calendrical needs of the older religions in a religiously plural society), where Friday is evidently designated as a day of rest, although this is not yet officially practiced in the Bahá’í religion.

The Bahá’í calendar is solar and, in terms of its yearly renewal, seasonal. The Bahá’í New Year is synchronized with the first day of spring (i.e., the vernal equinox) and, not surprisingly, is called “Naw-Rúz,” a Persian expression that literally means “New Day.” The day of Naw-Rúz is the first of nine Bahá’í holy days in which work is to be suspended.

Naw-Rúz is astronomically fixed. Bahá’u’lláh directed that this feast day be celebrated on whichever day the sun passes into the constellation of Aries, even if this occurs one minute before sunset. Due to the “equinox wobble” of 3.2 days, astronomically, Naw-Rúz could fall on March 19, 20, 21, or 22, depending on the time of the equinox. It is anticipated that the timing of Naw-Rúz will require the choice of a fixed location on earth, which will serve as the standard for the precise determination of the spring equinox. As with a number of other issues affecting the Bahá’í calendar, this matter will be resolved in due course by the Universal House of Justice, the elected international Bahá’í governing council. For now, the

Bahá'í New Year is celebrated on March 21 in the Occident, whereas in the Orient, including Iran and the Bahá'í World Centre in Haifa/Akká, the day of Naw-Rúz is determined on the basis of the true astronomical vernal equinox.

Besides its special designation as the “New Day,” March 21, 2010, for instance, in the ennobling naming conventions of the Badí‘ calendar, may be “read” in the following manner: This is the weekday of “Beauty” (*Jamál*, i.e., Sunday), the (first) day “Splendor” (*Bahá’*) in the (first) month of “Splendor” (*Bahá’*; names of days and months follow the same progression) in the (15th) year of “Affection” (*Vidád*), in the cycle (*Váhid*) of the first Grand Cycle (Arabic: *Kullu Shay’*, Persian: *Kull-i-Shay’*).

Arranged in historical order, the nine Bahá'í holy days recapitulate the origins and history of the Bahá'í religion. With the exception of Naw-Rúz (which metaphorically represents springtime renewal, both in its physical and its metaphysical sense), the Bahá'í Holy Days are annual commemorations of significant milestones in the formative era of Bábí and Bahá'í history:

1. Birth of Bahá'u'lláh (November 12, 1817).
2. Birth of the Báb (October 20, 1819).
3. Naw-Rúz (March 21, 1844).
4. Declaration of the Báb (May 23, 1844).
5. Martyrdom of the Báb (July 9, 1850).
6. First Day of Riḍván (April 21, 1863).
7. Ninth Day of Riḍván (April 29, 1863).
8. Twelfth Day of Riḍván (May 2, 1863).
9. Ascension of Bahá'u'lláh (May 29, 1892).

Taken together, the Birth of the Báb and the Birth of Bahá'u'lláh are referred to as the “Twin Holy Birthdays” since, in the Hegira (Muslim) lunar calendar, these fall on consecutive days: The birth of the Báb was on the first day of the month of Muḥarram 1235 AH (October 20, 1819), while the prior birth of Bahá'u'lláh fell on the second day of Muḥarram 1233 AH (November 12, 1817). Whether the Twin Holy Birthdays are to be celebrated on a solar or lunar basis will later be determined by the Universal House of Justice. For now, they are observed on a solar basis in most Bahá'í communities worldwide.

There is a religiously “seasonal” aspect as well, since the Bahá'í calendar sets apart 19 days, from March 2 to 20, for fasting from sunrise to sunset. The Badí‘ calendar further regulates the rhythm of Bahá'í community life in establishing the dates for the Nineteen-Day Feast, in which each local Bahá'í community gathers for the purpose of worship, consultation, and fellowship. Given its spiritual, administrative, and social functions, the Bahá'í “Nineteen-Day Feast” is the heart of Bahá'í communal worship and community building in each Bahá'í locality.

Each Bahá'í “Feast” (from the Latin *festus*, or “joyous”; the Arabic term is *díyáfat*, which derives from a root word for “hospitality”) typically takes place on the first day of the Bahá'í month. Here, the theophoric calendrical names take on their greatest significance, as reflected in the names of the 19 Bahá'í feasts, which are named after the Bahá'í months in which they respectively fall. These are:

Bahá'í Calendar Table

1.	Bahá'	Splendor	March 21
2.	Jalál	Glory	April 9
3.	Jamál	Beauty	April 28
4.	'Azamat	Grandeur	May 17
5.	Núr	Light	June 5
6.	Rahmat	Mercy	June 24
7.	Kalimát	Words	July 13
8.	Kamál	Perfection	August 1
9.	Asmá'	Names	August 20
10.	'Izzat	Might	September 8
11.	Mashíyyat	Will	September 27
12.	'Ilm	Knowledge	October 16
13.	Qudrat	Power	November 4
14.	Qawl	Speech	November 23
15.	Masá'il	Questions	December 12
16.	Sharaf	Honor	December 31
17.	Sulṭán	Sovereignty	January 19
18.	Mulk	Dominion	February 7
	Ayyám-i-Há'	Intercalary Days	February 26
19.	'Alá'	Loftiness	March 2 (Bahá'í Fast)

These “names of God” may not only be invoked, but they may be evoked. According to Bahá'u'lláh, these “names” of God may be reflected as human perfections (to the degree humanly possible), like a polished mirror:

Having created the world and all that liveth and moveth therein, He, through the direct operation of His unconstrained and sovereign Will, chose to confer upon man the unique distinction and capacity to know Him and to love Him—a capacity that must needs be regarded as the generating impulse and the primary purpose underlying the whole of creation. . . . Upon the reality of man, . . . He hath focused the radiance of all of His names and attributes, and made it a mirror of His own Self. Alone of all created things man hath been singled out for so great a favor, so enduring a bounty. (Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh*, 65)

Reflecting divine attributes, however, requires divine assistance, for not until “the dross is blotted out from the face of the mirror it can never represent the image of the sun nor reflect its light and glory” (Ibid., 66) This divine assistance is brought by the wisdom and inspiration of the “Manifestations of God” (Prophets or Messengers of God), as Bahá'u'lláh further explains:

Led by the light of unfailing guidance, and invested with supreme sovereignty, They [Manifestations of God] are commissioned to use the inspiration of Their words, the effusions of Their infallible grace and the sanctifying breeze of Their Revelation for the cleansing of every longing heart and receptive spirit from the dross and dust of earthly cares and limitations. Then, and only then, will the Trust of God, latent in the reality of man, emerge, as resplendent as the rising Orb of Divine Revelation, from behind the veil of concealment, and implant the ensign of its revealed glory upon the summits of men's hearts. (Ibid., 67)

The mere fact that the name of a given Bahá'í month is a godly quality that can be acquired as a human virtue does not, alone, accomplish that result. No burst of insight will emanate from the simple recitation of, say, "Grandeur." Meditating on a virtue and then manifesting it is part and parcel of Bahá'í self-transformation. In many Bahá'í feasts, the devotional prayers and readings are often focused on the name of the Bahá'í month as a "theme," although there is certainly no requirement to do so.

Take, for example, the attribute of "Generosity," which is the name of one of the years. (*Jád*; idiosyncratic construction of the Arabic *jūd*), for instance, which appears as the eighth year in the cycle of 19 years, called a "Unity" (*Váhíd*). In the Persian Hidden Words (no. 49), Bahá'u'lláh states that giving to the poor is a human expression of divine generosity:

O CHILDREN OF DUST! Tell the rich of the midnight sighing of the poor, lest heedlessness lead them into the path of destruction, and deprive them of the Tree of Wealth. To give and to be generous are attributes of Mine; well is it with him that adorneth himself with My virtues. (Bahá'u'lláh, *The Hidden Words of Bahá'u'lláh*, 39)

While not directly related to the calendar, the idea that the divine names have a transformative potential can be seen in this passage from the *Persian Bayán* 5:4:

For the divine Cycle advanceth in stages, until such Revelation when all things will be called by the names of God, such that no name will be assigned to anything unless it resembleth one of the names of God, glorified and exalted is He. . . . This will occur gradually and in stages, until all heaven, earth, and that which lieth between them, will be filled with the names of God. . . . Well is it with the people of that age who call nothing but by a name of God. That age is worthy to be praised as the beginning of the worlds of paradise! (Provisional translation by Saiedi, *Gate of the Heart*, 334)

Bahá'u'lláh explains that God is sanctified above all attributes and "names." Therefore, any and all references to the "names of God" apply to the "Manifestations of God" (i.e., Messengers of God, or Prophets), as Bahá'u'lláh states in

the *Gems of Divine Mysteries*: “Thus hath He revealed these most excellent names and most exalted words in the Manifestations of His Self and the Mirrors of His Being. It is therefore established that all names and attributes return unto these sublime and sanctified Luminaries” (Bahá'u'lláh, *Gems of Divine Mysteries*, 35).

These “stages” of transformation, of which the Báb speaks, involve a process that may be termed *theophoric metamorphosis* (previously defined at the beginning of this article). Beyond the contemplative life, so classically modeled by monks and mendicants in cloistered isolation, the various names of God must be effectively “translated” from the realm of ideals into the arena of social action in order for a transformation to take place. (In fact, Bahá'u'lláh prohibited monasticism in this day and age.) As a result, the individual is transformed to the degree that society is transformed as a result of that act, and vice versa. This may be illustrated as follows:

By contemplating and “translating” the name “Light” (the name of the fifth Bahá'í month) into a personal virtue for the social commonweal, an individual may conceive of a way to enlighten others. By meditating on the name, “Knowledge” (the name of the 12th Bahá'í month) and then manifesting that attribute in action, a person may impart insight or information to others, which will benefit them. In the same vein, by reflecting deeply, then acting on the divine name, “Mercy” (the name of the sixth Bahá'í month), one may elect to perform a singular deed of “mercy” or kindness by ministering to the sick, poor, or otherwise disadvantaged members of society. Here, a godly “name” is effectively expressed as a goodly action. The Bahá'í calendar not only charts the march of time, but addresses the quality of time by synergistically inspiring the progress of soul and society.

There are certain “mystical”—that is, symbolic—aspects to the Badí'/Bahá'í calendar as well, but these more recondite features of the calendar are beyond the scope of this article. Suffice it to say that the Bahá'í calendar, by charting physical time and associating time with divine perfections translatable as human virtues, not only quantitatively measures a given point in time, but qualitatively measures the progress of the soul in relation to the social moment. Thus, the theophoric (“God bearing”) nature of the calendar, in theory, becomes theomorphic (“God manifesting”) in practice, whereby the Bahá'í calendar may prospectively live up to its name, Badí' (“Wondrous”).

Christopher Buck and J. Gordon Melton

See also ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, Ascension of; Ayyám-i-Há (Bahá'í Intercalary Days); Báb, Festival of the Birth of the; Báb, Festival of the Declaration of the; Báb, Martyrdom of the; Bahá'í Faith; Bahá'í Fast; Bahá'u'lláh, Ascension of; Bahá'u'lláh, Festival of the Birth of; Covenant, Day of the; Naw-Rúz, Festival of; Nineteen-Day Feast (Bahá'í); Nowruz; Race Unity Day; Ridván, Festival of; Spring Equinox (Vernal); World Religion Day.

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■ Bahá'í Faith

The Bahá'í Faith arose from the Bábí Faith, a religion that briefly flourished in Iran in the 1840s. It was established by 'Alí-Muhammad of Shiraz (1819–1850), who in 1844 took on the title of *the Báb* ("the Gate") and who declared himself to be the fulfillment of Islamic prophecies. The Twelver Shi'a Islam that dominates Iran expected the return of the Twelfth Imam (a messianic figure), and the expectation peaked among some Shi'ites in 1844. The Báb initially hinted that he was merely a gate to the Twelfth Imam, but gradually made explicit a claim to be the Twelfth Imam himself. He also penned mystic commentaries on the Qur'an, whose style and content signified a claim to divine revelation.

Among the early converts to the Bábí movement was Mírzá Ḥusayn-'Alí, a nobleman born in northern Iran whose father was a palace official. As the Bábí leadership was executed, one after another, his role in the movement grew in importance. In the summer of 1848, he assembled a gathering of the remaining Bábí leaders at which he gave each a title; he took on the title of Bahá'u'lláh (the glory of God), one subsequently endorsed by the Báb. Before his execution, the Báb recognized Bahá'u'lláh's teenage half-brother Yahyá (1831–1912) as a figure-head leader of the Bábí community, though he gave Yahyá no explicit authority. Considering that Yahyá was completely unknown in the Bábí community and

reciting the word of God twice daily in order to connect the believer to the revelation.

The horizontal dimension of the devotional life has various aspects. Bahá'u'lláh says Bahá'ís should be “anxiously concerned with the needs of the age ye live in, and center your deliberations on its exigencies and requirements” (*Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh*, selection CVI). Bahá'ís are thus encouraged, individually and collectively, to improve the world around them.

Robert Stockman

See also ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, Ascension of; Ayyám-i-Há (Bahá'í Intercalary Days); Báb, Festival of the Birth of the; Báb, Festival of the Declaration of the; Báb, Martyrdom of the; Bahá'í Calendar and Rhythms of Worship; Bahá'í Fast; Bahá'u'lláh, Ascension of; Bahá'u'lláh, Festival of the Birth of; Covenant, Day of the; Naw-Rúz, Festival of; Nineteen-Day Feast (Bahá'í); Nowruz; Race Unity Day; Ridván, Festival of; World Religion Day.

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Bahá'í Fast (March 2–20)

Most world religions include the practice of fasting, and many include times of community-wide fasting. The Bahá'í Faith has such a period of communal fasting that occurs each March 2–20. The Fast follows Ayyám-i-Há, the Bahá'í Intercalary Days, and is itself followed by the Festival of Naw-Rúz.

The Fast was ordained by Bahá'u'lláh (1817–1892), the prophet-founder of the Bahá'í Faith, and elaborated on by ‘Abdu’l-Bahá (1844–1921), the eldest son, and the successor and interpreter of Bahá'u'lláh. During the 19-day fast, the believer abstains from food and drink from sunrise to sunset, and remains mindful of God

and of the divine purpose for human existence. Both Bahá'u'lláh and 'Abdu'l-Bahá extolled the virtue of the Fast:

All praise be unto God, Who hath revealed the law of obligatory prayer as a reminder to His servants, and enjoined on them the Fast that those possessed of means may become apprised of the woes and sufferings of the destitute. (Bahá'u'lláh, *The Importance of Obligatory Prayer and Fasting*, II)

Verily, I say, fasting is the supreme remedy and the most great healing for the disease of self and passion. (Bahá'u'lláh, *The Importance of Obligatory Prayer and Fasting*, XVII)

This Fast leadeth to the cleansing of the soul from all selfish desires, the acquisition of spiritual attributes, attraction to the breezes of the All-Merciful, and enkindlement with the fire of divine love. ('Abdu'l-Bahá, *The Importance of Obligatory Prayer and Fasting*, XXVI)

Fasting is binding on men and women from the age of spiritual maturity (15 years). Those exempt from the requirement of fasting include, *inter alia*: (1) travelers, if the journey exceeds nine hours; (2) those traveling on foot, if the journey is over two hours; (3) those who are ill; (4) those over 70; (5) women who are pregnant; (6) nursing mothers; (7) women in their menses; (8) those engaged in heavy labor.

Foregoing earthly appetites helps one acquire godly attributes. There are benefits for the Bahá'í community as well, in that collective participation in the fast deepens solidarity.

Special prayers have been revealed for the fast. Some are quite poetic and laden with metaphors of devotion and transformation. One example is this excerpt from a prayer by Bahá'u'lláh:

I beseech Thee, O my God, by that Letter which, as soon as it proceeded out of the mouth of Thy will, hath caused the oceans to surge, and the winds to blow, and the fruits to be revealed, and the trees to spring forth, and all past traces to vanish, and all veils to be rent asunder, and them who are devoted to Thee to hasten unto the light of the countenance of their Lord, the Unconstrained, to make known unto me what lay hid in the treasuries of Thy knowledge and concealed within the repositories of Thy wisdom. Thou seest me, O my God, holding to Thy Name, the Most Holy, the Most Luminous, the Most Mighty, the Most Great, the Most Exalted, the Most Glorious, and clinging to the hem of the robe to which have clung all in this world and in the world to come. (*Bahá'í Prayers*, 242–43)

Fasting from food is a point of departure for spiritual development, where one progresses, for example, to a state where one fasts from even the desire for food,

or even the thought of food, and focuses instead on nearness to God, expressed through prayer and meditation, and service to others. The ultimate fasting is abstaining from passions of the self to become more compassionate toward others. The nineteen-day Bahá'í Fast, therefore, is an ideal preparation for the Bahá'í New Year (Naw-Rúz, lit. “New Day”) that immediately follows the Fast, when the vernal equinox heralds a new springtime of personal and social renewal, both physical and spiritual.

Christopher Buck

See also ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, Ascension of; Ayyám-i-Há (Bahá'í Intercalary Days); Báb, Festival of the Birth of the; Báb, Festival of the Declaration of the; Báb, Martyrdom of the; Bahá'í Calendar and Rhythms of Worship; Bahá'í Faith; Bahá'u'lláh, Ascension of; Bahá'u'lláh, Festival of the Birth of; Covenant, Day of the; Fast of Gedaliah; Fast of the First Born; Naw-Rúz, Festival of; Nineteen-Day Feast (Bahá'í); Race Unity Day; Riḍván, Festival of; World Religion Day.

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Bahá'u'lláh, Ascension of (May 29)

The Ascension of Bahá'u'lláh (1817–1892), prophet-founder of the Bahá'í Faith, is a solemn occasion commemorated by Bahá'ís worldwide at 3:00 a.m. on May 29 annually. It is one of the nine major Bahá'í holy days, on which work is to be suspended. Shortly before dawn, Bahá'u'lláh passed away at 3:00 a.m. on May 29, 1892 in the Mansion of Bahjí (Arabic, “delight”), near ‘Akká in Palestine (now Israel). Local Bahá'í communities worldwide therefore gather at that time (3:00 a.m.) to commemorate their founder with Bahá'í prayers and scriptures, usually culminating in the chanting in Arabic, or recitation in translation, of what is known as the “Tablet of Visitation,” a special prayer reserved for the commemoration of Bahá'u'lláh, as well as the Báb.

A telegram bearing the news, “The Sun of Bahá’ has set,” was immediately dispatched by ‘Abdu’l-Bahá (1844–1921), Bahá'u'lláh's eldest son and successor, to Sulṭán ‘Abdu’l-Ḥamíd, with a request for permission to bury Bahá'u'lláh at Bahjí, which was granted. Bahá'u'lláh was interred shortly after sunset, on the very day of his ascension.

Where the sacred remains of Bahá'u'lláh are interred is now known as the Shrine of Bahá'u'lláh—a building that, in 2008, was designated a UNESCO World

Heritage Site along with the Shrine of the Báb, making these two Bahá'í sacred sites the first modern religious edifices to be so distinguished. By virtue of their outstanding value to humanity, World Heritage Sites belong to all the peoples of the world.

Of far greater moment, however, is Bahá'u'lláh's contribution to a future world heritage of global unity and world peace, culminating in a golden age envisioned and promised by Bahá'u'lláh himself. One example of this promise appears in Cambridge scholar Edward Granville Browne's historic meeting with Bahá'u'lláh, in 1890:

Thou hast come to see a prisoner and an exile. . . . We desire but the good of the world and the happiness of the nations. . . . That all nations should become one in faith and all men as brothers; that the bonds of affection and unity between the sons of men should be strengthened; that diversity of religion should cease, and differences of race be annulled—what harm is there in this? . . . Yet so it shall be; these fruitless strifes, these ruinous wars shall pass away, and the “Most Great Peace” shall come. . . . These strifes and this bloodshed and discord must cease, and all men be as one kindred and one family. Let not a man glory in this, that he loves his country; let him rather glory in this, that he loves his kind. (Browne, *A Traveller's Narrative*, xl)

After the ascension of Bahá'u'lláh, his eldest son 'Abdu'l-Bahá became the appointed “Centre of the Covenant” (successor to Bahá'u'lláh), pursuant to provisions of Bahá'u'lláh's Most Holy Book and the *Kitáb-i-'Ahd* (“Book of the Covenant”), which is Bahá'u'lláh's last will and testament, written entirely in his own hand. Nine days after Bahá'u'lláh's ascension, this singularly important document was shown to the local Bahá'ís and read in their presence. The passage conferring successorship upon 'Abdu'l-Bahá is as follows:

The Will of the divine Testator is this: It is incumbent upon the Aghsán, the Afnán and My kindred to turn, one and all, their faces towards the Most Mighty Branch. Consider that which We have revealed in Our Most Holy Book: “When the ocean of My presence hath ebbed and the Book of My Revelation is ended, turn your faces toward Him Whom God hath purposed, Who hath branched from this Ancient Root.” The object of this sacred Verse is none other except the Most Mighty Branch ['Abdu'l-Bahá]. (Bahá'u'lláh, *Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh Revealed After the Kitáb-i-Aqdas*, 221)

Significantly, the text of this document was made available to the scholarly community by Russian orientalist Aleksandr Toumansky (1861–1920), who published the original Persian text, along with a Russian translation. At the same time, Toumansky also published a poem, “Lament,” by the acclaimed Bahá'í poet, Mírzá 'Alí-Ashraf Láhijání, known as “'Andalib” (the “Nightingale”) who writes, in part:

Today the cupbearer, by God's design,
 poured bile into the cup of life, not wine. . . .
 Through Him the Day of Resurrection dawned:
 Now earth quakes at the setting of His Sun. . . .
 We'll never hear His voice again, but there
 the Nightingale of Paradise flies free. (Translated by Ahang Rabbani and
 Anthony Lee, in Momen, *Bahá'u'llah: A Short Biography*, 154–55)

Throughout the world's religious history, the death of the founder has typically precipitated a crisis over succession. The Ascension of Bahá'u'lláh, however, was immediately followed by the succession of 'Abdu'l-Bahá as leader of the Bahá'í community, as authorized "Interpreter" of Bahá'u'lláh's teachings, and as the "Perfect Exemplar" of Bahá'í virtues. This clear transition, ordained in Bahá'u'lláh's written testament, preserved the integrity of the Bahá'í community and protected it from the perils of schism.

The Universal House of Justice, the international governing body of the global Bahá'í community, declared the period from April 1992 to April 1993 as the second "Bahá'í Holy Year" to mark both the centenary itself and the inauguration of the Covenant of Bahá'u'lláh in November 1892. On May 29, 1992, the centenary of Bahá'u'lláh's passing, several thousand Bahá'ís from more than 200 countries gathered to pay homage to Bahá'u'lláh at the Shrine of Bahá'u'lláh, which is adjacent to the Mansion of Bahjí, located near Old Acre on Israel's northern coast.

Some Bahá'ís arrange, through the Office of Pilgrimage at the Bahá'í World Centre in Haifa, Israel, to schedule their pilgrimages around the time of the Birth or Ascension of Bahá'u'lláh. During their pilgrimage, Bahá'ís visit the Shrine of Bahá'u'lláh. In commemorating the Ascension of Bahá'u'lláh, Bahá'ís worldwide transport themselves, in mind and heart, to the resting place of Bahá'u'lláh, in what may be thought of as a virtual pilgrimage by the estimated 5.5 million adherents of the Bahá'í Faith in the world today.

Bahá'ís may individually or collectively commemorate the Ascension of Bahá'u'lláh with prayers and readings as befit the occasion, often followed by refreshments and fellowship in a dignified manner. Among the Bahá'í readings, of special relevance to this occasion include: Nabíl's account of the ascension of Bahá'u'lláh; the Tablet of Visitation of the Báb and Bahá'u'lláh; the "Book of the Covenant" (Bahá'u'lláh's last will and testament, appointing 'Abdu'l-Bahá as successor); passages in the *Kitáb-i-Aqdas* relating to the succession of 'Abdu'l-Bahá; the "Tablet of the Branch"; and 'Abdu'l-Bahá's first message to the Bahá'ís, announcing Bahá'u'lláh's ascension, advising Bahá'ís not to be disconsolate, and to remain steadfast.

The Ascension of Bahá'u'lláh is of special moment, commemorating the life and contributions of a great religious figure in modern history, whose shrine has been designated a UNESCO World Heritage Site, and whose universal principles

of world unity may, in the course of time, be recognized as an enduring contribution to the world's heritage.

Christopher Buck

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

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Bahá’u’lláh, Festival of the Birth of (November 12)

The Festival of the Birth of Bahá’u’lláh is one of five Bahá’í festivals, and one of the nine Bahá’í holy days on which work is to be suspended. It is a joyous occasion, for it celebrates the historic birth of the prophet-founder of the Bahá’í Faith, whose prophetic role as the “World-Reformer” and “World-Unifier” is at the core of Bahá’í belief regarding the person and work of Bahá’u’lláh.

In “founded” religions, the birth of the founder is accorded historic and religious importance. Beyond their intrinsic and honorific significance, the birth and childhood of Bahá’u’lláh relate to the birth of the Bahá’í Faith, in that certain childhood experiences are said to have had a formative influence. What is singular about the birth of Bahá’u’lláh is that it is part of a double religious holy day, called “the Festival of the Twin Birthdays.”

The Bahá’í Faith was founded by Mírzá Ḥusayn-‘Alí Núrí, known by his spiritual title, Bahá’u’lláh (1817–1892), and by Sayyid ‘Alí-Muḥammad of Shiraz (1819–1850), better known as the Báb (“the Gate”), who claimed to be the Qá’im

(“Ariser”/“Resurrector”), the messianic figure expected in Shi‘i Islam, the majority faith in Iran. Throughout his six-year ministry, the Báb heralded “Him Whom God shall make manifest,” whose advent was imminent. Most of the Bábís (followers of the Báb) came to accept Bahá'u'lláh as that messianic figure. Many current Bahá'í laws, in fact, were originally instituted by the Báb and were subsequently selectively ratified and revised by Bahá'u'lláh and set forth in the preeminent Bahá'í scripture, *The Most Holy Book (Kitáb-i-Aqdas)*. The Birth of Bahá'u'lláh and the Birth of the Báb are therefore closely linked for several reasons.

Bahá'u'lláh was born at dawn on November 12, 1817, in Tehran, the capital of Persia (now Iran), in the district known as the Darvázih Shimrán, which was at the edge of the city. His father was Mírzá Buzurg, Vazír of Núr (a province in Persia). Bahá'u'lláh's mother was Khadíjih Khánum, Mírzá Buzurg's second wife. As a child, the young Mírzá Ḥusayn-‘Alí is said to have never cried, nor showed restlessness. He would spend summers in Takúr, the ancestral home of his father, Mírzá Buzurg, in the province of Núr. Bahá'u'lláh recounts one memorable event that took place on the last of seven days of festivities of the marriage of one of his older brothers:

When I was still a child and had not yet attained the age of maturity, . . . it was announced that the play “Sháh Sultán Salím” would be presented. . . . After this the king held audience with his court, during which intelligence was received that a rebellion had broken out on a certain frontier. . . . A few moments later cannons were heard booming from behind the tent, and it was announced that a battle had been engaged. This Youth regarded the scene with great amazement. When the royal audience was ended, the curtain was drawn, and, after some twenty minutes, a man emerged from behind the tent carrying a box under his arm. “What is this box,” I asked him, “and what was the nature of this display?” “All this lavish display and these elaborate devices,” he replied, “the king, the princes, and the ministers, their pomp and glory, their might and power, everything you saw, are now contained within this box.” . . . Ever since that day, all the trappings of the world have seemed in the eyes of this Youth akin to that same spectacle. (Bahá'u'lláh, “Lawḥ-i-Ra'ís.” *The Summons of the Lord of Hosts*, 165–67)

As a young nobleman, Bahá'u'lláh manifested great sagacity and mastery of argument, and was known as the “Father of the Poor” for his beneficence in Tákur and its vicinity. He later became a prominent figure in the Bábí religion. In 1852, while in prison during the unrest that followed the Báb's execution under religious decree and by a government firing squad of 750 men on July 9, 1850, Bahá'u'lláh experienced a series of visions and accepted his role as the Promised One foretold by the Báb and in the messianic texts of all religions.

By imperial decree, Bahá'u'lláh was subsequently exiled to Baghdad (1853–1863), to Istanbul (1863), Adrianople (1863–1868), then to ‘Akká (Acre) in

Palestine (1868–1892), where he would spend the rest of his life in custody in Palestine, although the last years were in relative comfort under house arrest. Bahá'u'lláh died on May 29, 1892, in Bahji, Palestine.

In the Most Holy Book (*Kitáb-i-Aqdas*), Bahá'u'lláh established the five festivals of the Bahá'í year, having ratified the observance of Naw-Rúz, which the Báb had previously designated as a religious festival (the only holy day instituted in the *Persian Bayán*): “All Feasts have attained their consummation in the two Most Great Festivals, and in the two other Festivals that fall on the twin days.” The “two Most Great Festivals” are the Declaration of Bahá'u'lláh (known as the “Festival of Ridván” (“Paradise”) from April 21 to May 2 (commemorating Bahá'u'lláh's initial proclamation of his prophetic mission in Baghdad, April 21–May 2, 1863), and the Declaration of the Báb, which occurred on the evening of May 22, 1844 (but dated May 23 since, in the Bahá'í calendar, the new day begins at sunset the previous day). The other two Bahá'í festivals are the Birth of the Báb and the Birth of Bahá'u'lláh.

As the cofounders of the Bahá'í Faith, Bahá'u'lláh and his predecessor, the Báb, are often referred to as the “Twin Manifestations,” and the occasions of their respective births are similarly called the “Twin Birthdays.” The birthdays of the Báb and Bahá'u'lláh fall on two consecutive days in the Muslim lunar calendar. “The Birth of the Abhá Beauty [Bahá'u'lláh],” Bahá'u'lláh wrote, “was at the hour of dawn on the second day of the month of Muḥarram, the first day of which marketh the Birth of His Herald [the Báb]. These two days are accounted as one in the sight of God.” The explanation for this statement is that, in the Muslim lunar calendar, the birth of the Báb was on the first day of the month of Muḥarram 1235 AH (October 20, 1819), while the birth of Bahá'u'lláh took place on the second day of Muḥarram 1233 AH (November 12, 1817).

While the Bahá'í calendar (of 19 months of 19 days, plus intercalary days) is solar, Bahá'ís in parts of the Middle East observe these two Bahá'í holy days according to the lunar calendar (which is how they were observed by Bahá'u'lláh himself), while Bahá'ís of the West and elsewhere (such as among the Bahá'ís in Syria and Lebanon) celebrate these occasions by their corresponding dates on the Common Era calendar. In the future, the Universal House of Justice will determine whether these “Twin Days” will be celebrated on a solar or lunar basis.

In observing the Birth of Bahá'u'lláh, Bahá'ís normally refrain from working and/or attending school. Whether celebrated jointly as one occasion or independently, these are joyous events for Bahá'ís, who rejoice together to increase the unity of the community through collective worship and fellowship, often through devotional meetings or musical programs. There is no prescribed ceremony or service for celebrating the event, and all who would like to attend are welcomed.

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See also ‘Abdu'l-Bahá, Ascension of; Ayyám-i-Há (Bahá'í Intercalary Days); Báb, Festival of the Birth of the; Báb, Festival of the Declaration of the; Báb, Martyrdom of the; Bahá'í Calendar and Rhythms of Worship; Bahá'í Faith; Bahá'í Fast;

Bahá'u'lláh, Ascension of; Covenant, Day of the; Naw-Rúz, Festival of; Nineteen-Day Feast (Bahá'í); Race Unity Day; Riḍván, Festival of; World Religion Day.

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Baisakhi. See Wesak/Vesak

Balarama, Appearance Day of Lord

Balarama is the elder brother of the deity Krishna. In contrast to Krishna, usually pictured as having dark skin, Balarama is pictured as of fair skin. He is depicted as being of light color. One story tells of Balarama being born of a light hair of Vishnu. As Vaishnava Hindu thought developed, Balarama has attained status as another *avatara* (incarnation) of Vishnu, as an incarnation not of Adishesha, the divine serpent upon which Vishnu rests, or an extension of the incarnation of Krishna so that both are seen as “parts” of one whole. In the scriptures, however, Balarama appears primarily as an additional character in the stories of Krishna, and almost never by himself apart from him.

From his conception, Balarama's life was threatened. The king in whose service his father was employed had been told that his mother Devaki would bear the person who would eventually kill him. Thus, he had each child born to Devaki and her husband Vasudeva killed, six in all. Balarama was as an unborn embryo miraculously removed from Devaki's womb to that of Vasudeva's second wife Rohini, who eventually bore Balarama. Balarama's younger brother was also attended by miracles at his birth. The guards who would have slain him fell asleep, and he was carried away to be raised by Yashoda, a woman of a humble cow-herding family.

Balarama is usually also present in temples dedicated to Krishna. During the Indian month of Shravana (July–August on the Common Era calendar), Vaishnavas celebrate the pastimes of Krishna as a youth among the Gopis (the young women who tended

fragrance. Its wine-offering is one fourth of a *hin*. Bread, parched grain or tender grain you shall not eat until this very day, until you bring the offering of your G-d; it is an everlasting statute for all your generations in all your dwelling places.

You shall count for yourselves, from the day after the day of rest (Pesach) from the day on which you will bring the *omer* wave-offering, seven complete weeks they shall be, until the day after the seventh week, you shall count fifty days, and you shall bring a new meal-offering to Ad-noy.

In years past, prior to the destruction of the Jerusalem Temple, on the day after Passover, an omer of grain would be brought to the temple as an offering. Today, beginning the second night of Passover, the observant Jews will recite a blessing prayer and state the count on the days since Passover. The period of the counting is also considered a time of partial mourning, in memory of a large number of the students of Rabbi Akiba Ben Josef (c. 50–c. 135 CE) who died in a plague. The observant will refrain from planning marriages, parties, and haircuts during this time. On Lag b’Omer, the 33rd day of the count, there is a minor break in the observance to remember the achievements of one of Rabbi Akiba’s students, and the mourning rules are lifted for that day.

The counting of Omer begins on the Sunday evening of the day after Passover (remembering that in the Hebrew calendar, the new day began at sundown).

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See also Passover; Shavuot.

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Covenant, Day of the (November 26)

The Day of the Covenant is a Bahá’í holy day honoring the Covenant of Bahá’u’lláh and, in particular, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá (1844–1921) as the “Centre of the Covenant.” This festival is observed alongside the nine Bahá’í holy days on which work is to be suspended.

The Day of the Covenant pays tribute to the Covenant of Bahá’u’lláh, a matter of signal importance to Bahá’ís, in that it is the key to the integrity of the Bahá’í religion. By preserving and perpetuating its indivisibility, the Covenant established by Bahá’u’lláh protects the Bahá’í religion from schism. In anticipation of his eventual passing, Bahá’u’lláh called on all Bahá’ís to turn to ‘Abdu’l-Bahá

(Bahá'u'lláh's eldest son) as *successor* (inerrant leader of the Bahá'í community), *interpreter* (authorized exponent of Bahá'u'lláh's teachings), and *exemplar* (perfect embodiment of Bahá'í virtues and morality). This triple function has been as powerful in its influence on the future course and fortunes of the Bahá'í community as 'Abdu'l-Bahá's station is conceptually and functionally distinctive, and remains so.

Beyond 'Abdu'l-Bahá himself, the Bahá'í Covenant extends to Shoghi Effendi (1897–1957), Guardian of the Faith from 1921 until his passing in 1957, and subsequently to the Universal House of Justice, the Bahá'í international council, elected every five years by national representatives of Bahá'í communities worldwide since its establishment in April 1963. Despite efforts by individuals who sought to aggrandize themselves by claiming authority, the Bahá'í community is an organically unified faith-community, free of schisms or factions.

Historically, the Day of the Covenant was established by 'Abdu'l-Bahá in order to discontinue the practice of early believers who, on their own initiative, used to celebrate his birthday. In a number of locales, the Bahá'ís, beyond celebrating his birthday, also observed the day on which 'Abdu'l-Bahá acceded to the leadership of the Bahá'í community as the designated successor to Bahá'u'lláh (1817–1892), who passed away on May 29, 1892. Honoring 'Abdu'l-Bahá's birthday was problematic particularly because of this remarkable historical coincidence: 'Abdu'l-Bahá was born on May 22, 1844, which, in fact, was the very same night that the Báb declared his prophetic mission. So, in order not to divert focus from the anniversary of the Declaration of the Báb, which was a sacred event, 'Abdu'l-Bahá chose November 26 for commemorating the inauguration of Bahá'u'lláh's Covenant. According to Bahá'í historian Hasan M. Balyuzi:

'Abdu'l-Bahá told the Bahá'ís that this day [May 22] was not, under any circumstances, to be celebrated as His day of birth. It was the day of the Declaration of the Báb, exclusively associated with Him. But as the Bahá'ís begged for a day to be celebrated as His, He gave them November 26th, to be observed as the day of the appointment of the Centre of the Covenant. It was known as *Jashn-i A'zam* (The Greatest Festival), because He was *Ghusn-i A'zam*—the Greatest Branch. In the West it is known as the Day of the Covenant. (Balyuzi, *'Abdu'l-Bahá: The Centre of the Covenant of Bahá'u'lláh*, 523; brackets added)

The “Most Mighty Branch” is the spiritual title given to 'Abdu'l-Bahá by Bahá'u'lláh in the latter's Will and Testament—known as the “Book of the Covenant” (*Kitáb-i 'Ahd*). Of this historic document, Shoghi Effendi wrote: “Written entirely in His own hand . . . this unique and epoch-making Document, designated by Bahá'u'lláh as His ‘Most Great Tablet,’ and alluded to by Him as the ‘Crimson Book’ in His ‘Epistle to the Son of the Wolf,’ can find no parallel in the Scriptures of any previous Dispensation” (Shoghi Effendi, *God Passes By*, 238).

‘Abdu’l-Bahá purposely selected a date that is six months (i.e., 180 days) on the Common Era calendar away from the commemoration of Bahá’u’lláh’s Ascension, which temporal distancing entirely removed any formal association between those two observances. In the East, the Day of the Covenant also became known as the “Day of Accession” (*Yawm-i Julús*). In the West, this occasion was first celebrated in 1910, when it was first known as the “Fete-Day of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá” or “the Master’s Day,” before it eventually came to be called the “Day of the Covenant.” (Walbridge, *Sacred Acts*, 244–45.)

There are no required observances for this occasion. Typically, the believers (and their invited friends) gather together for a devotional service of prayers and readings from the sacred Bahá’í writings, often interspersed with musical interludes, and usually followed by fellowship and refreshments. The Day of the Covenant, therefore, commemorates the unique Bahá’í Covenant. Shoghi Effendi claimed that “nowhere in the books pertaining to any of the world’s religious systems . . . do we find any single document establishing a Covenant endowed with an authority comparable to the Covenant which Bahá’u’lláh had Himself instituted” (Effendi, *God Passes By*, 238).

On the Day of the Covenant, Bahá’ís honor ‘Abdu’l-Bahá as the “Perfect Exemplar” of Bahá’u’lláh’s teachings and as the “Centre of the Covenant” of Bahá’u’lláh, paying tribute to that sacred Covenant, which historically safeguarded and will continue to preserve the unity of the Bahá’í faith-community for centuries to come.

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See also ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, Ascension of; Ayyám-i-Há (Bahá’í Intercalary Days); Báb, Festival of the Birth of the; Báb, Festival of the Declaration of the; Báb, 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; Naw-Rúz, Festival of; Nineteen-Day Feast (Bahá’í); Race Unity Day; Ridván, Festival of; World Religion Day.

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Religious Celebrations

AN ENCYCLOPEDIA OF HOLIDAYS,
FESTIVALS, SOLEMN OBSERVANCES,
AND SPIRITUAL COMMEMORATIONS

Volume Two

L-Z

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See also Akshay Tritiya (Jain); Diwali; Gyana Panchami; Kartika Purnima; Mauna Agyaras; Mahavir Jayanti; New Year's Day (Jain); Paryushana; Paush Dashami.

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Naw-Rúz, Festival of (March 21)

The Festival of the Naw-Rúz is one of five Bahá'í festivals and one of the nine Bahá'í holy days on which work is to be suspended.

On March 21, 2010, the United Nations marked the first "International Day for Nowruz" (Persian, "New Day"), an ancient spring festival of Persian origin (and the Zoroastrian New Year's Day) celebrated for over 3,000 years and enjoyed today by more than 300 million people worldwide as the beginning of the new year. Mary Boyce notes that it "seems a reasonable surmise that Nowrúz, the holiest of them all [Zoroastrian holy days], with deep doctrinal significance, was founded by Zoroaster himself" (Boyce, *Encyclopædia Iranica*). Naw-Rúz may be sacred or secular, depending on the setting. For Bahá'ís, Naw-Rúz is sacred, imbued with the symbolism of spiritual renewal.

As the first day of the Bahá'í New Year, Naw-Rúz coincides with the spring equinox in the Northern Hemisphere, which typically occurs on March 21. However, since Bahá'u'lláh (1817–1892, prophet-founder of the Bahá'í Faith) enjoined that this festival be celebrated on whatever day the sun passes into the constellation of Aries—that is, the vernal equinox—Naw-Rúz could fall on March 19, 20, 21, or 22, depending on the precise time of the equinox (even should this occur one minute before sunset). It is expected that the precise timing of Naw-Rúz will require a designated spot on earth—to be decided by the Universal House of Justice (the governing international Bahá'í council) in the future—to serve as the standard for astronomically determining the spring equinox. Since Naw-Rúz also falls on the first day of a Bahá'í month, it coincides with the day on which a Nineteen-Day Feast is to be observed, but the two events must be kept separate.

Bahá'í communities typically observe Naw-Rúz and meetings that combine prayerful devotions with joyous fellowship. "Naw-Rúz is our New Year, a Feast of hospitality and rejoicing" (Shoghi Effendi, *Directives from the Guardian*, 30). Bahá'ís from Iranian backgrounds may follow some traditions associated with the ancient Persian festival, but these cultural practices are kept distinct from the religious observance itself. To augment the festive joy, signal events are often

scheduled to take place on Naw-Rúz, being an ideal time for momentous announcements as well.

The Báb (1819–1850), precursor and herald of Bahá'u'lláh, created a new calendar—called the Badí' (“Wondrous”/“New”) calendar—which consists of 19 months of 19 days each, with four intercalary days (five in leap years) to round out the solar year. The only religious festival that the Báb had instituted was Naw-Rúz. The first day of the new year (i.e., the day of “Bahá'”) was Naw-Rúz (March 21), which the Báb specifically set apart in honor of “Him Whom God shall make manifest,” whose advent the Báb foretold and whose appearance, as Bahá'u'lláh, the majority of the Báb's followers accepted. The Báb wrote:

God hath called that month the month of Bahá' (Splendour, Glory), meaning that therein lieth the splendour and glory of all months, and He hath singled it out for Him Whom God shall make manifest. (The Báb, *Persian Bayán* 5:3; provisional translation by Saiedi, *Gate of the Heart*, 328)

Because this day was “singled it out for Him Whom God shall make manifest,” Naw-Rúz was highly symbolic and its observance pointed forward to that messianic figure for whose imminent advent it was the Báb's professed mission to prepare the world (and whom the majority of Bábís recognized as Bahá'u'lláh later on). The Báb described Naw-Rúz as the Day of God on which goodly acts performed would receive the recompense for same acts as though performed for an entire year, while those who recite a special verse 361 times would be preserved from anything ill-fated during the course of the coming year (The Báb, *Persian Bayán* 5:3). The Báb's laws, which were scarcely put into practice during the time of the Báb, were primarily intended to prepare his followers for the coming of “Him Whom God shall make manifest” and would be abrogated, except as accepted, at his advent. Such laws, as Nader Saiedi points out, were “not meant to be taken literally but instead perform a symbolic and profoundly transformative function” (Saiedi, *Gate of the Heart*, 343).

Even so, Bahá'u'lláh preserved and adapted several of the Báb's major laws to be observed by the Bahá'ís. Bahá'u'lláh formally ordained Naw-Rúz as a festival unto those who have observed the period of fasting that precedes Naw-Rúz:

O Pen of the Most High! Say: O people of the world! We have enjoined upon you fasting during a brief period, and at its close have designated for you Naw-Rúz as a feast. Thus hath the Day-Star of Utterance shone forth above the horizon of the Book as decreed by Him Who is the Lord of the beginning and the end. (Bahá'u'lláh, *The Kitáb-i-Aqdas*, 25)

This Bahá'í law refers to the nineteen-day Fast (March 2–20), a period of spiritual discipline and purification, during which Bahá'ís abstain from food and drink from sunrise to sunset. (Bahá'í days begin and end at sunset.) Since the Fast ends on the sunset on which Naw-Rúz begins, Naw-Rúz celebrations are often combined with a dinner.

Unlike the other Bahá'í holy days, which commemorate historic events in Bahá'í history, Naw-Rúz has religious significance primarily due to its symbolism of renewal. As an Indo-European language, Persian is distantly related to English, which explains why the word “naw” (pronounced “no”) in Persian is similar to the English word “new.” Naw-Rúz not only heralds the advent of spring, but is also symbolic of a “spiritual springtime.” On a personal level, the Festival of Naw-Rúz is a time for renewal. On the occasion of Naw-Rúz in 1906, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá (1844–1921), the successor to Bahá’u’lláh, wrote to the American Bahá’ís saying, in part:

It is New Year; . . . now is the beginning of a cycle of Reality, a New Cycle, a New Age, a New Century, a New Time and a New Year. . . . I wish this blessing to appear and become manifest in the faces and characteristics of the believers, so that they, too, may become a new people, and . . . may make the world a new world, to the end that . . . the sword be turned into the olive branch; the flash of hatred become the flame of the love of God . . . all races as one race; and all national anthems harmonized into one melody. (‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Tablets of Abdul-Baha Abbas*, 38–40)

Thus, this ancient Zoroastrian holy day and Persian springtime festival has been transformed into a Bahá'í holy day, which has, as its animating purpose, the creation of a new world in which a new era of peace and prosperity may be brought about through the universal Bahá'í principles of unity through diversity, famously expressed by Bahá’u’lláh in 1890 in a historic visit by Cambridge orientalist Edward G. Browne (*A Traveller’s Narrative*, xl), in these oft-quoted words:

That all nations should become one in faith and all men as brothers; that the bonds of affection and unity between the sons of men should be strengthened; that diversity of religion should cease, and differences of race be annulled—what harm is there in this? . . . Yet so it shall be; these fruitless strifes, these ruinous wars shall pass away, and the “Most Great Peace” shall come.

Bahá’ís see this “New Day” as having transformed the vernal equinox into a universal celebration of the oneness of humankind.

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See also ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, Ascension of; Ayyám-i-Há (Bahá'í Intercalary Days); Báb, Festival of the Birth of the; Báb, Festival of the Declaration of the; Báb, 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; Nineteen-Day Feast (Bahá'í); Race Unity Day; Riḍván, Festival of; World Religion Day.

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Nehan

Many Buddhists believe that the birth, the day of enlightenment (at the age of 35), and death (in his 80s) of Gautama Buddha, the founder of the Buddhist movement, occurred on the same day of the year. That day, usually called Wesak, is the night of the full moon of the Hindu month of Vaisakha (usually in May on the Common Era calendar). Tibetans call it Sakya Dawa.

Other Buddhists, most notably those in Japan, hold their commemorations of those three events on separate days. Nehan, February 15, is the day Japanese Buddhists believe that Gautama Buddha died near the town of Kushinagara, almost due north of Calcutta near the border with Nepal, on the banks of the Hiranyavati River. The Buddha is often pictured in a reclining state, using his right hand as a pillow, calling to memory the moments before his death. Early accounts of his death suggest that he was sleeping on a bed between two sala trees whose white flowers fell continuously during his last day.

In his last discourse, called the Yuikyogyo, the Last Teaching of Shakyamuni Buddha, he discussed the transitory state of life, noting that the physical body (even his) dies, and that it is the Dharma (the teaching) that is eternal. He also noted that he had withheld nothing from his teachings, that there were no secret teachings, nor any teachings with a hidden meaning. He closed by saying that “In a moment, I shall be passing into Nirvana.” His death is popularly referred to as the Mahanirvana or Parinirvana. In Japan, there are a variety of ways to

of Thailand, Malaysia, and Singapore—where temples to the Mother of the Dipper and her nine star sons are still popular. The Dipper Mother is still worshipped in a few places in China, most notably at the White Cloud Temple in Beijing, but the most impressive festivals for her sons are found at such places as Phuket Island (Thailand); Penang, Butterworth, and Ampang (Malaysia); and Singapore.

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See also Double Ninth Festival; Pure Brightness Festival; Spring Dragon Festival.

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Nineteen-Day Feast (Bahá'í)

Bahá'ís gather together once every 19 days to participate in their local communities' “Nineteen-Day Feast.” To those unfamiliar with the Bahá'í Faith, this might seem like odd timing, but it is perfectly in keeping with the seasonal rhythm of the Bahá'í calendar of 19 months of 19 days. In the Bahá'í calendar, each day, month, year and cycle of years is named after a godly attribute that can be expressed as a goodly virtue. The Nineteen-Day Feast is at the heart of Bahá'í community life and is an essential feature of the “community building” that takes place in each local Bahá'í faith-community, which is typically defined by city/town boundaries. Unlike those religious “congregations,” where believers choose the particular group with whom they wish to affiliate, Bahá'ís in a given town must learn to function together not as a congregation but as a community, both socially and for purposes of local administration. This structure is itself conducive to achieving the purposes of the Bahá'í Faith—to eliminate barriers and prejudices of all kinds, and to bring about unity through concerted action.

An integral part of the Bahá'í calendar, the first day of each Bahá'í month is often referred to as the “Feast Day.” While the Nineteen-Day Feast is not one of the nine Bahá'í holy days on which work is suspended, the Bahá'í Feast, informally at least, functions as though it were a “monthly” Bahá'í holy day. It is a time of worship, deliberation, and fellowship, as reflected in the three formal phases (i.e., devotional, consultative, and social) of each Bahá'í Feast comprising its spiritual, administrative, and unitive functions.

Historically, the Nineteen-Day Feast has its origins in the religion of the Báb (1819–1850), the herald and precursor of Bahá'u'lláh (1819–1892), the

prophet-founder of the Bahá'í Faith. In the *Arabic Bayán*, the Báb commanded his followers to invite 19 people every 19 days, even if one is able to offer only water in this offer of hospitality. Bahá'u'lláh ratified this practice in the Most Holy Book: “Verily, it is enjoined upon you to offer a feast, once in every month, though only water be served; for God hath purposed to bind hearts together, albeit through both earthly and heavenly means” (Bahá'u'lláh, *The Kitáb-i-Aqdas*, 40). Here, the primary purpose of the Feast is “to bind hearts together”—that is, to produce unity among the believers.

The term, “Feast” (Arabic, *díyáfat*) primarily means “hospitality” and has been used in connection with sacred events, such as the Lord’s Supper, portrayed in the Qur’an (Q. 5:112–15) as a banquet table descending from heaven, from which the disciples ate. “Feast” includes “both earthly and heavenly” food, with spiritual sustenance being the latter meaning. Thus, in current practice, refreshments are commonly served in the social portion of the Feast, after the spiritual enrichment of the devotional portion of Feast, consisting primarily of prayers and readings from the Bahá'í scriptures. In some Bahá'í communities, there may on occasion be a dinner (whether a “potluck” or provided by the host) that takes place before the formal Feast program begins.

The Nineteen-Day Feast was further developed by ‘Abdu’l-Bahá and Shoghi Effendi. During the time of the Báb and Baha’u’llah, the Feast was individually observed as the offer of hospitality to guests invited to the home. During the ministry of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, however, the Feast became communal in character and was essentially institutionalized. Of this development, Bahá'í historian Robert Stockman wrote:

In early 1905 Howard and Mary MacNutt and Julia Grundy attended a Feast hosted by ‘Abdu’l-Bahá in Akka. The celebration included Bahá'ís from many parts of the world and was especially moving . . . The next morning at breakfast ‘Abdu’l-Bahá praised the Feast, adding, “You must meet together in this way in America.” The three pilgrims took His exhortation as a commandment. After returning home Howard MacNutt consulted with the New York Board of Counsel and it organized the first real Feast known to have been held in North America. It occurred on 23 May 1905 in New York City. . . . Isabella Brittingham took the Feast to the rest of the United States. . . . In early 1906 she visited Johnstown, New York; Chicago; Kenosha; Racine; Milwaukee; Minneapolis; and Cleveland. In all of these cities she inaugurated the Feast as a formal community event. (Stockman, *The Bahá'í Faith in America: Early Expansion, 1900–1912*)

‘Abdu’l-Bahá stressed the devotional character of these gatherings and their unitive function in providing greater social cohesion among the Bahá'í faithful, and promised that “all its mystic meanings” would unfold in the faithful observance of the Bahá'í Feast (*Selections from the Writings of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá*, 91).

Perhaps one of the mystical dimensions of Feast is the very real sense that the spirit of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá may be present when true unity is experienced:

On that night thy house was the nest and the shelter of the birds of God. The divine melodies and the celestial lyres made that place a feast of heaven and an assembly of the Kingdom. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá was present there in heart and soul and was joyful and happy. (‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Tablets of Abdul-Baha Abbas*, 216)

Although no sacramental importance attaches to the Bahá'í Feast, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá attached great importance to it and, in doing so, compared the Bahá'í Feast to the “Lord’s Supper” among Christians:

Thou hast written concerning the Feast. This festivity, which is held on a day of the nineteen-day month, was established by His Holiness the Báb, and the Blessed Beauty directed, confirmed and warmly encouraged the holding of it. It is, therefore, of the utmost importance. You should unquestionably see to it with the greatest care, and make its value known, so that it may become solidly established on a permanent basis. Let the beloved of God gather together and associate most lovingly and spiritually and happily with one another, conducting themselves with the greatest courtesy and self-restraint. Let them read the holy verses, as well as essays which are of benefit, and the letters of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá; encourage and inspire one another to love each and all; chant the prayers with serenity and joy; give eloquent talks, and praise the matchless Lord.

The host, with complete self-effacement, showing kindness to all, must be a comfort to each one, and serve the friends with his own hands.

If the Feast is befittingly held, in the manner described, then this supper will verily be the Lord’s Supper, for its fruits will be the very fruits of that Supper, and its influence the same. (‘Abdu’l-Bahá, from a Tablet to an individual believer, translated from the Persian, *The Nineteen Day Feast*, 425.)

The devotional portion of the Feast is often themed by the name of that particular Bahá'í month (i.e., “Honor,” “Loftiness,” “Power,” “Mercy,” etc.), although there is no requirement to do so. The devotions will consist of selected readings from Bahá'í sacred texts and the recitation or chanting of Bahá'í prayers (from memory or reading a Bahá'í prayer book). Music and singing may be included, and following the Bahá'í readings and prayers, creative or performative expressions of Bahá'í devotion may be integrated into the observance. Occasionally, passages from the scriptures of other world religions may be included in the Feast program. The Feast is the only Bahá'í event intended for the Bahá'í community alone other than elections, and thus not generally open, except that non-Bahá'ís who may be present will be treated cordially as guests, and consultation on sensitive community matters will be deferred.

Shoghi Effendi developed the administrative component by integrating into the institution of the Feast a period of consultation on the affairs of the Bahá'í community.

Thus the consultative part of the Feast is when announcements of upcoming events are made, community affairs are discussed, consultation on topics of special concern is facilitated, where ideas and recommendations for consideration by the local Bahá'í council (i.e., the annually elected, nine-member “Local Spiritual Assembly” or “LSA”) are offered and recorded. Such consultation gives every member a voice in community affairs and thus makes the Feast an “arena of democracy at the very root of society” (Letter from the Universal House of Justice to the Bahá'ís of the World, August 27, 1989). Study topics of particular relevance may be presented for brief discussion for the community's edification, and the Bahá'í youth and children may be invited to perform or make special presentations. Thus, the consultative portion has an educative function in addition to its administrative purpose. It is also a venue in which the LSA may report its recent decisions to the Bahá'í community.

The social time of the Feast, which is typically at the end, is vital for promoting unity among the “Bahá'í friends” (as Bahá'ís are often called). Strength and vibrancy of the Bahá'í community is, after all, coefficient with its unity and solidarity. The vitality of social cohesion often manifests itself in the percentage of the enrolled Bahá'í members who participate in their community Feasts, and this, in turn, may have a direct impact on the level of giving to the Bahá'í Fund, to which only Bahá'ís may contribute.

The Bahá'í Faith has been established in every country except for the Vatican and North Korea, thus making it the second-most widespread religion in the world, next to Christianity. Today, the majority of the estimated six million Bahá'ís observe the Nineteen-Day Feast, which is an integral feature of Bahá'í community life. In some Muslim states in the Middle East, this practice has become restricted. For example, the Islamic Republic of Iran has banned the practice as part of a systematic campaign, since the Islamic Revolution of 1979 (and in earlier regimes), to eradicate the Bahá'í Faith in Iran.

The Nineteen-Day Feast is adaptable to a wide array of cultural contexts, which is an important feature, considering the fact that societies are becoming increasingly diverse. Music is often featured in the Feast program and typically reflects the Feast's geographic and cultural milieu. In the United States, for instance, the Feast might well feature upbeat gospel-style music, while Feasts in Bahá'í communities that are predominantly Native American, Native Canadian, or indigenous in Central and South America often incorporate cultural traditions as well; songs might be pentatonic in Bahá'í feasts in Asia. The Feast experience is further enriched by Bahá'í musicians around the world who, working in every genre and style and mixing them as well, set the Bahá'í writings to music, becoming a robust source of music not only for Feast, but for other Bahá'í devotional activities as well.

Ideally, the Nineteen-Day Feast operates to make each local Bahá'í community more tight-knit. This requires that the Bahá'ís themselves make it a priority and attach great importance to it. Although attendance at the Feast is not “obligatory” in the sense of being a Bahá'í law, and no one is pressured to attend, every Bahá'í should consider it a duty and privilege to be present at Feast. As ‘Abdu’l-Bahá has said: “As to the Nineteen Day Feast, it rejoiceth mind and heart. If this feast be

held in the proper fashion, the friends will, once in nineteen days, find themselves spiritually restored, and endued with a power that is not of this world” (*Selections from the Writings of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá*, 91).

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See also ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, Ascension of; Ayyám-i-Há (Bahá’í Intercalary Days); Báb, Festival of the Birth of the; Báb, Festival of the Declaration of the; Báb, 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; Naw-Rúz, Festival of; Race Unity Day; Riḍván, Festival of; World Religion Day.

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Nino, Saint's Day of St. (January 14)

Nino (c. 296–c. 338), is part of a distinct minority of saints. She was a woman, she was an active missionary for the Christian movement, and she died of natural causes. She is also among the very few Orthodox saints remembered as “*isapostolos*” or equal to the apostles.

Nino, according to most traditional accounts, was from Cappadocia, an area now in central Turkey, and was a relative of George, the Roman soldier who became a Christian martyr and saint. It has been claimed that she was the daughter of the Roman general Zabulon and, on her mother’s side, the niece of Houbnal I, the Christian patriarch of Jerusalem. He facilitated her trip to Rome during which she had a vision of the Blessed Virgin Mary in which she was told to go to Iberia (i.e., ancient Georgia) and given a cross as a protective spiritual shield.

While on her way to Iberia, she became part of a community of 37 virgins that the beautiful Armenian Hripsime (or Rhipsime, d. c. 290 CE). They lived together under the leadership of a man named Gayane. When the Armenian king Tiridates III took

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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.

Christopher Buck

See also ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, Ascension of; Ayyám-i-Há (Bahá'í Intercalary Days); Báb, Festival of the Birth of the; Báb, Festival of the Declaration of the; Báb, 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); Riḍván, 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 Bhagavata Purana 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 the 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

worship.” Schools, often a focus of religious freedom issues, have been especially called upon to organize events emphasizing the civil rights issues around religious freedom. The U.S. Department of Education has issued a set of guidelines summarizing the religious liberties of students in the public school system.

A coalition of organizations representing a spectrum of approaches to religious freedom has joined to promote Religious Freedom Day. They include the Association of American Educators, the Beckett Fund, the Council for America’s First Freedom, Gateways to Better Education, the Institute on Religion and Democracy, and the Providence Forum.

J. Gordon Melton

See also Human Rights Day; International Religious Freedom Day; World Religion Day.

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Riḍvân, Festival of (April 20–May 2)

The Festival of Riḍvân is a 12-day festival. The 1st, 9th, and 12th days of Riḍvân are three of the nine Bahá’í holy days on which work is to be suspended. Among the Bahá’í holy days, the Festival of Riḍvân (“Paradise”) is preeminent, for it marks the inception of the Bahá’í Faith as a distinct religion. Observed from sunset on April 20 (marking the onset of April 21 in the Bahá’í calendar) to sunset on May 2, the Festival of Paradise comprises three Holy Days. On the 1st (April 21), 9th (April 29), and 12th (May 2) days of Riḍvân, Bahá’í communities will gather to commemorate the signal events of that historic occasion.

The Bahá’í Faith, one of the youngest world religions, was founded by Mírzá ḥusayn-‘Alí Núrí (1817–1892), a Persian nobleman known by his spiritual title, Bahá’u’lláh (“Glory/Splendor of God”). The Bahá’í religion is also regarded as having been cofounded by Bahá’u’lláh’s predecessor and harbinger, Sayyid ‘Alí-Muḥammad of Shiraz (1819–1850), known as the Báb (“the Gate”).

The unfolding of Bahá’u’lláh’s prophetic mission was gradual, progressively revealed in a series of disclosures. The “Festival of Paradise” commemorates Bahá’u’lláh’s private disclosure of his eschatological identity to a handful of his companions—around four years prior to his public proclamation to the rulers and religious leaders of the world (c. 1867–1873). To a select few Bábís, Bahá’u’lláh announced that he was the “Promised One” foretold by the Báb. To a select group of the world’s most powerful potentates and clerics, Bahá’u’lláh sent open epistles, proclaiming himself to be the “Promised One” foretold by the prophets of all past religions. In these “Tablets” (as the epistles were called), together with general Tablets addressed to kings and ecclesiastics collectively, Bahá’u’lláh stated that he was,

inter alia, the long-awaited “World Reformer” who came to unify the world—a transformation that would, in the course of time, come about through the power of his universal principles and laws adapted to the needs of this day and age.

Briefly, the history of Riḍván began on the afternoon of April 21, 1863 (around 3:00 p.m.). Bahá’u’lláh arrived in the Najíbíyyih Garden, subsequently designated as the “Garden of Riḍván.” Located on the east bank of the Tigris in Baghdad, Najíbíyyih was once a wooded garden, where Muḥammad-Najíb Páshá (Turkish: Mehmed Necib, d. May 1851), governor of Baghdad (r. 1842–1847), had built a palace and placed a wall around the garden. It is now the site of “Baghdad Medical City” (formerly known as Saddam Medical City), a large modern teaching hospital in Baghdad.

Bahá’u’lláh’s entrance into the Garden of Riḍván signaled the commencement of his momentous announcement, first to his companions, and eventually to the world at large. Exactly what transpired is shrouded in mystery, and accounts vary. Prior to this time, Bahá’u’lláh had concealed his mission for 10 years (1853–1863). This period of “messianic secrecy” has been referred to as the “Days of Concealment” (*ayyám-i-butūn*—a term that connotes the image of embryonic development), although Bahá’u’lláh’s writings in Baghdad during this period are rife with hints about his prophetic mission, especially in his preeminent doctrinal text, the *Book of Certitude* (*Kitáb-i-Íqán*), which was revealed in two days and two nights in January 1861.

In 1869, as part of the subsequent public proclamation of his mission to the world’s political and religious leaders, Bahá’u’lláh dispatched his second epistle (c. 1869) to Napoleon III (d. 1873). In this “Tablet” (spirited out of Bahá’u’lláh’s prison cell by a Bahá’í pilgrim, who concealed the letter in the brim of his hat) to the emperor of France, Bahá’u’lláh announced: “All feasts have attained their consummation in the two Most Great Festivals, and in two other Festivals that fall on the twin days.” Here, the two “Most Great Festivals” are the Festival of Riḍván and the Declaration of the Báb (evening of May 22, 1844). The “twin days” refer to the Birth of the Báb (October 20, 1819) and the Birth of Bahá’u’lláh (November 12, 1817).

The purport of what Bahá’u’lláh proclaimed on that momentous first day of Riḍván, beyond the declaration that he was “He Whom God will make manifest,” involves matters of great import in that Bahá’u’lláh had decreed three of his most far-reaching laws, by (1) abrogating holy war, (2) asserting that no independent Messenger of God (literally, “Manifestation of God”) after Bahá’u’lláh would appear for at least a full 1,000 years, and (3) dispensing entirely with the Islamic category of ritual impurity or “uncleanness” (*najis*). Bahá’u’lláh later recounted this sweeping pronouncement in the Most Holy Book (the *Kitáb-i-Aqdas*):

God hath, likewise, as a bounty from His presence, abolished the concept of “uncleanness,” whereby divers things and peoples have been held to be impure. He, of a certainty, is the Ever-Forgiving, the Most Generous. Verily, all created things were immersed in the sea of purification when, on that first day of Riḍván, We shed upon the whole of creation the splendours of Our

most excellent Names and Our most exalted Attributes. (Bahá'u'lláh, *The Kitáb-i-Aqdas*, 47)

The Festival of Riḍván is important for yet another reason: most Bahá'í elections take place at this time. On the first day of Riḍván (April 21), all local Bahá'í councils, each known as a Local Spiritual Assembly, is democratically elected, in a “spiritual election” conducted prayerfully and meditatively.

The system of Bahá'í elections is unique, both religiously and politically. Political scientist Arash Abizadeh has observed that Bahá'í elections are governed by formal institutional rules and informal norms that specifically prohibit such familiar features of the political landscape as nominations, competitive campaigns, voting coalitions, or parties. As an alternative model of democratic elections, Bahá'í elections incorporate three core values at the individual, interpersonal, and institutional levels: (1) the inherent dignity of each person; (2) the unity and solidarity of persons collectively; and (3) the intrinsic justice, fairness, and transparency of elected Bahá'í institutions. Bahá'í elections thus serve four primary functions: (1) selection (electing representatives); (2) legitimation (authorizing Bahá'í governing bodies in the eyes of the community at large); (3) education (cultivating the spirit of responsibility in each Bahá'í voter); and (4) integration (fostering solidarity within the community as a whole).

National Bahá'í conventions are also held during the Festival of Riḍván for the purpose of electing national councils, each of which is called a National Spiritual Assembly. An exception to the timing of these conventions occurs once every five years, when the Universal House of Justice, the international governing council of the Bahá'í Faith, is elected during the Festival of Riḍván. The next is scheduled for Riḍván 2013, with national Bahá'í elections rescheduled for May.

The Festival of Riḍván marks the inchoative establishment of the Bahá'í religion as a distinct faith-community through Bahá'u'lláh's disclosure of his divine authority. The Festival of Riḍván also marks the progressive advancement of the Bahá'í Faith as a distinct administrative order through the process of electing the faith-community's governing authorities.

Bahá'ís believe that in a future Golden Age—in which a self-governing world commonwealth emerges as the fruit of social evolution enlightened by Bahá'í sociomoral principles—the Festival of Riḍván is destined to become the greatest celebratory event in the world, according to the teleological Bahá'í vision of the inevitable course of human history.

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See also ‘Abdu'l-Bahá, Ascension of; Ayyám-i-Há (Bahá'í Intercalary Days); Báb, Festival of the Birth of the; Báb, Festival of the Declaration of the; Báb, 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; Naw-Rúz, Festival of; Nineteen-Day Feast (Bahá'í); Race Unity Day; World Religion Day.

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Rishi Panchami

Rishi Panchami is a Hindu holiday with two related emphases. It is observed on the fifth day after the new moon in the Hindu month of Bhadrapad (August–September on the Common Era calendar), which is the final day of the primary Teej Festival, known as Hartalika Teej, widely celebrated across northern India and Nepal as a women’s festival. It is also a day set aside to show respect of the seven legendary sages known as the Sapta Rishis.

The celebration of Teej is directed to Parvati, the wife of Shiva. She is said to have fasted and practiced various austere practices to win Shiva’s affections. Women observe a strict fast dedicated to Shiva on the day of Rishi Panchami. In some regions, the fast is also observed by men. Women begin the day with a special ritual bath and will later in the day visit temples dedicated to Shiva for an appropriate ritual. The fast is usually broken following the Rishi Panchami puja (worship).



Hindu women take turns pouring water on each other while taking a ritual bath in the Bagmati River during Rishi Panchami in Nepal. (Getty Images)

Peace Ceremony at Lumbini, where the Buddha was born, and then the Gelugpa School accepted responsibility for the celebrations at Sarnath, where the Buddha began his public ministry and preached his first sermon.

The development of the World Peace Ceremony celebrations has left the original event at Bodh Gaya as primarily a gathering for the various sub-schools of the Nyingma tradition, though its observance regularly includes a visit from the Dalai Lama, who will make several stops in India throughout the week of Monlam.

J. Gordon Melton

See also Diwali; Doukhobor Peace Day; Monlam, the Great Prayer Festival; Nehan; Wesak/Vesak; World Peace and Prayer Day.

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World Religion Day (January)

World Religion Day, observed worldwide on the third Sunday of January each year, is a Bahá'í-inspired idea that has taken on a life of its own. In 2009, for instance, the Halifax (Nova Scotia) Regional Municipality in Canada celebrated its sixth annual World Religion Day in the Cathedral of All Saints, in recognition of which the mayor and councilors of the Halifax Regional Municipality issued a proclamation. In 2007, at the World Religion Day event hosted by the Entebbe Municipal Council of Entebbe, Uganda (situated on the northern shores of Lake Victoria), participating religious leaders signed a joint declaration to establish the Entebbe Inter-Faith Coalition. The signatories pledged to use “the unifying power of religion to instill in the hearts and minds of all people of faith the fundamental facts and spiritual standards that have been laid down by our Creator to bring them together as members of one family.”

World Religion Day, now observed internationally, originated among American Bahá'ís. Its history dates back to 1949, when the National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of the United States (the national Bahá'í governing council) instituted an annual World Religion Day “to be observed publicly by the Bahá'í Communities wherever possible throughout the United States.” The third Sunday of January each year was designated for this celebration, and the first World Religion Day event took place on January 15, 1950.

The Bahá'í Faith, among the younger of the independent world religions, emphasizes unity in the human community, and the inauguration of World Religion Day seemed a natural expression and extension of the Bahá'í focus on the unity of religions, races, and nations. However, this was not the exclusive, nor even the primary original purpose of World Religion Day. In 1968, the Universal

House of Justice, the international Bahá'í governing body established in 1963, wrote:

Your letter of September 30, with the suggestion that “there should be one day in the year in which all of the religions should agree” is a happy thought, and one which persons of good will throughout the world might well hail. However, this is not the underlying concept of World Religion Day, which is a celebration of the need for and the coming of a world religion for mankind, the Bahá'í Faith itself. Although there have been many ways of expressing the meaning of this celebration in Bahá'í communities in the United States, the Day was not meant primarily to provide a platform for all religions and their emergent ecumenical ideas. In practice, there is no harm in the Bahá'í communities' inviting the persons of other religions to share their platforms on this Day, providing the universality of the Bahá'í Faith as the fulfillment of the hopes of mankind for a universal religion are clearly brought forth. (Lights of Guidance, no. 1710)

On April 2002, the Universal House of Justice issued a letter “To the World’s Religious Leaders,” in which interfaith dialogue is highly regarded. However, the letter states that the initiatives of the interfaith movement of the previous century “lack both intellectual coherence and spiritual commitment.” For its part, “the Bahá'í community has been a vigorous promoter of interfaith activities from the time of their inception” and will continue to assist, valuing the “cherished associations” that these activities create. It continued: “We owe it to our partners in this common effort, however, to state clearly our conviction that interfaith discourse, if it is to contribute meaningfully to healing the ills that afflict a desperate humanity, must now address honestly . . . the implications of the over-arching truth . . . that God is one and that, beyond all diversity of cultural expression and human interpretation, religion is likewise one.”

While neither the Universal House of Justice nor the National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of the United States currently plays an active role in promoting World Religion Day events, the Bahá'í International Community (an official organ of the Universal House of Justice) has consistently reported on such events, with obvious appreciation. In the United States, the timing of World Religion Day now conflicts with Martin Luther King, Jr., Day (the third Monday in January), observed for the first time on January 20, 1986. While this has led to the discontinuance of World Religion Day in many locales, some Bahá'í communities integrate the two days, while others may hold their World Religion Day events a few days earlier.

This, in brief, is how and why World Religion Day has subsequently taken on a life of its own. There are several outstanding examples of this. On January 20, 2007, in Brazzaville, the Congo Republic became the second country to issue a postage stamp for World Religion Day. Featuring a globe surrounded by the symbols of 11 religions, the stamp bears a French superscription which, translated, reads: “God is the source of all religions.” Following a World Religion Day

program that drew more than 250 participants from eight faith-communities, agents were present to sell both the stamps and first-day covers. In 1985, Sri Lanka had become the first country to issue a World Religion Day stamp.

The purpose of World Religion Day today is to highlight the essential harmony of the world's religions, to foster their transconfessional affinity through interfaith ecumenism, and to promote the idea and ideal of world unity in which the world's religions can play a potentially significant role. This generalization is based on observations of how World Religion Day is celebrated in events that are sponsored by organizations that are not Bahá'í, whether in concert with local Bahá'í sponsorship or entirely independent of it. (In most cases, the Bahá'ís continue to play a vital role in the orchestration and success of these events.) The day is celebrated with interfaith dialogue, conferences, and other events that advance not only mutual understanding (or what scholars call "spiritual literacy"), but recognition, respect, and reciprocity among the followers of all religions who join together in celebrating World Religion Day.

Where observed, World Religion Day events typically do not attract representatives and participants from all local faith-communities, primarily for religious reasons. As such, World Religion Day provides an insightful social barometer of the extent to which various religious groups are willing to formally associate with each other

While World Religion Day events are still sponsored and cosponsored by local members of the Bahá'í Faith worldwide, an increasing number of World Religion Day events are independently organized by interfaith or multi-faith coalitions. For instance, in Tralee, Ireland, the local World Religion Day observance was organized by the Kerry Diocesan Justice, Peace and Creation Committee, a member organization of Pax Christi International in Ireland. In 2009, the third annual observance of World Religion Day in Greensboro, North Carolina, was organized by FaithAction and the Piedmont Interfaith Council. Also in 2009, World Religion Day was celebrated by Vadamalayan Hospitals and Vadamalayan Institute of Paramedical Sciences, in which a quiz competition was held to mark the occasion.

In certain cases, civic governments, both national and local, have recognized the positive social value of World Religion Day events. In 2004, the House of Representatives of the General Assembly of the Commonwealth of Kentucky proclaimed January 17–18, 2004, as "World Religion Weekend" and went on to "urge the Commonwealth's citizens to participate in the observance of World Religion Weekend." In 2007, the Republic of Ghana's Ghana@50 Secretariat organized a symposium themed "The Unity of the Faiths" on World Religion Day on Sunday, February 18, 2007. In January 2008, the City Council of Duncan, British Columbia, Canada, proclaimed January 20, 2008, as World Religion Day. In a 2009 World Religion Day event in Australia, the parliamentary secretary for multicultural affairs and settlement services, Laurie Ferguson, said: "Interfaith dialogue plays an important role in increasing understanding of our nation's religious and cultural diversity and bringing Australians closer together. The Australian Government supports interfaith dialogue at the highest levels." Many World Religion Day events are associated with mayoral or municipal proclamations.

World Religion Day is self-perpetuating, thanks to the initiatives of progressive individuals and institutions who share a vision of religious confraternity. It is an inspired idea, with widespread appeal and remarkable longevity.

Christopher Buck

See also ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, Ascension of; Ayyám-i-Há (Bahá’í Intercalary Days); Báb, Festival of the Birth of the; Báb, Festival of the Declaration of the; Báb, 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; Naw-Rúz, Festival of; Nineteen-Day Feast (Bahá’í); Race Unity Day; Riḍván, Festival of.

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