

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.

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

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## **Riḍván, Festival of (April 20–May 2)**

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The Festival of Riḍván is a 12-day festival. The 1st, 9th, and 12th days of Riḍván 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 Riḍván (“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 Riḍván, 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-butun*—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)