

Reference

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Ridván, Festival of

Members of the Baha'i Faith consider the 12-day Festival of Ridván (Paradise) as pre-eminent among its various Holy Days. Ridván marks the inception of the Baha'i Faith as a distinct religion. It is observed from sunset on April 20 (marking the onset of April 21 in the Baha'i calendar) to sunset on May 2 but is punctuated with three Holy Days. On the 1st (April 21), 9th (April 29) and 12th (May 2) days of Ridván, work is suspended, as local Baha'i communities gather to commemorate the signal events of that historic occasion.

The Baha'i Faith was founded by Mírzá Husayn-'Alí Núrí (1817–1892), more popularly known by his spiritual title, Bahá'u'lláh (“Glory/Splendor of God”). It is also regarded as having been co-founded by Bahá'u'lláh's predecessor, Sayyid 'Alí-Muhammad of Shíráz (1819–1850), known as the Báb (the “Gate”).

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 (ca. 1867–1873). The unfolding of Bahá'u'lláh's prophetic mission was progressively revealed in a series of disclosures. To a select few Bábís, Bahá'u'lláh announced that he was the “Promised One” foretold by the Báb. Several years later (ca. 1867–1870), Bahá'u'lláh sent open epistles (called Tablets) to a select group of the world's most powerful potentates and clerics, proclaiming himself to be the “Promised One” foretold by the prophets of all past religions. In these Tablets, together with general Tablets addressed to kings and religious leaders 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.

The history of Ridván begins during the afternoon of April 21, 1863 (around 3:00 p.m.), when Bahá'u'lláh arrived in the Najíbíyyih Garden, subsequently designated as the Garden of Ridván. Located on the east bank of the Tigris in Baghdad, Najíbíyyih was once a wooded garden, where Muhammad-Najíb Páshá (Turkish: Mehmed Necib; d. May 1851), governor of Baghdad between 1842 and 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 to the gardens signaled the commencement of his messianic announcement, first to his companions, and eventually to the world at large. Exactly what transpired, however, is shrouded in mystery, and accounts vary. Through the previous decade (1853–1863), Bahá'u'lláh had concealed his mission. 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 were rife with hints about his prophetic mission, especially in his pre-eminent doctrinal text, the *Book of Certitude* (*Kitáb-i-Íqán*), which was revealed in two days and two nights in January 1861.

Beyond the basic revelation that he was “He Whom God will make manifest,” Bahá'u'lláh also proclaimed three additional matters of great import to Baha'is. He (1) abrogated holy war (*jihad*); (2) asserted that no independent Messenger of God (literally, “Manifestation of God”) would appear for at least a full 1,000 years; and (3) dispensed 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 Ridván, We shed upon the whole of creation the splendours of Our most excellent Names and Our most exalted Attributes.”

In 1869, as part of the subsequent public proclamation of his mission to the world's political and reli-

gious leaders, Bahá'u'lláh dispatched his second epistle (ca. 1869) to Napoleon III (d. 1873). In this Tablet (spirited out of Bahá'u'lláh's prison cell by a Baha'i 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 Ridván 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 Festival of Ridván is important for yet another reason: most Baha'i elections take place at this time. On the first day of Ridván (April 21), all local Baha'i councils, each known as a Local Spiritual Assembly, are democratically elected, in a "spiritual election" conducted prayerfully and meditatively.

The system of Baha'i elections is unique, both religiously and politically. Arash Abizadeh, assistant professor of political science at McGill University in Canada, notes that Baha'i 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, Baha'i 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 inherent justice, fairness, and transparency of elected Baha'i institutions. Baha'i elections thus serve four primary functions: (1) selection (electing representatives); (2) legitimation (authorizing Baha'i governing bodies in the eyes of the community at large); (3) education (cultivating the spirit of responsibility in each Baha'i voter); and (4) integration (fostering solidarity within the community as a whole).

National Baha'i conventions are also held during the 12-day Festival of Ridván 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 Baha'i Faith, is elected during the Festival of Ridván. The next is scheduled for Rid-

ván 2013, with national Baha'i elections rescheduled for May.

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

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

Christopher Buck

See also: Baha'i Faith; Bahá'u'lláh; Birth/Ascension of Bahá'u'lláh; Birth of the Báb; Calendars, Religious; Temples—Baha'i Faith; World Religion Day.

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Rigpa Fellowship

Among the most popular books on Buddhism to be published in the West in recent years is Sogyal Rinpoche's work, *The Tibetan Book of Living and Dying*. When it was published in 1992, it introduced the author and his relatively new Tibetan Buddhist organization, Rigpa, to many people.

The Rigpa Fellowship was established in the United Kingdom in 1979 under the spiritual direction of Sogyal Rinpoche (b. ca. 1949). Born in Tibet in the late 1940s, Sogyal Rinpoche was brought up from an early age by his master, Jamyang Khyentse Chokyi Lodro, who recognized him as the incarnation of Tertön Sogyal (1856–1926), a teacher to the 13th Dalai Lama. In 1971 Sogyal Rinpoche moved to the United Kingdom in order to study comparative religion at Trinity College, Cambridge. Soon after, he moved to London, where he built up a small following of students and began to give teachings. In 1991 the present Rigpa Centre in north London was opened.

Eight international Rigpa retreats are held annually in various countries, drawing up to 3,000 participants overall. There are now 11 national centers around the world, in addition to retreat centers at Lerab Ling in the south of France and Dzogchen Beara in the southwest of Ireland. Buddhist teachers from a variety of traditions are invited to teach, as from the outset Rigpa has not relied exclusively on the teachings of Sogyal Rinpoche but has followed an ecumenical approach. International coordination takes place within three departments: finance and administration, teaching services, and executive directors. Though in each country there is a team responsible for running activities, the international staff offer support and are responsible for key strategic decisions in consultation with Sogyal Rinpoche and other lamas.

Rigpa has developed a graduated "study and practice" program that is delivered internationally, and that can take seven years to complete. It begins by introducing basic meditation practice, using *samatha* meth-



Sogyal Rinpoche, founder of the Rigpa Fellowship, a Tibetan Buddhist organization. (Corbis Sygma)

ods such as resting the mind on an object (usually a picture of Padmasambhava), mantra recitation, and watching the breath. Then the Mahayana compassion teachings of Lojong (Tibetan) are presented, together with the *tonglen* practice (giving and receiving). Next, students are introduced to the Vajrayana preliminaries, including "Going for Refuge" and *bodhicitta* (Sanskrit: "mind of awakening"). The main practice followed by committed students is the Longchen Nyingtik, which is based on the Dzogchen tradition of Tibetan Buddhism. In common with many other Buddhist groups, Rigpa does not rely on one sacred text but rather refers to a variety of Indian and Tibetan Buddhist texts.

In 1994 Sogyal Rinpoche was accused of fraud and assault. However these allegations were never proven. In response, senior students of Sogyal Rinpoche have said that they fear the lawsuit was part of a deliberate campaign to undermine the lama and his organization (Brown 1995). Sogyal Rinpoche, being from the Yogic