

*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)

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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; Ridván, Festival of; World Religion Day.

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## Nehan

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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