

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 Baha’is. Its history dates back to 1949, when the National Spiritual Assembly of the Baha’is of the United States (the national Baha’i governing council) instituted an annual World Religion Day “to be observed publicly by the Baha’i 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 Baha’i 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 Baha’i 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 World Religion Day (January) 937

House of Justice, the international Baha’i 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 Baha’i Faith itself. Although there have been many ways of expressing the meaning of this celebration in Baha’i 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 Baha’i communities’ inviting the persons of other religions to share their platforms on this Day, providing the universality of the Baha’i 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 Baha’i 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 Baha’is of the United States currently plays an active role in promoting World

Religion Day events, the Baha’i 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 Baha’i 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 938 World Religion Day (January)

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 Baha'i, whether in concert with local Baha'i sponsorship or entirely independent of it. (In most cases, the Baha'is 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 Baha'i 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.

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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-Baha, Ascension of; Ayyam-i-Ha (Baha’i Intercalary Days); Bab, Festival of the Birth of the; Bab, Festival of the Declaration of the; Bab, Martyrdom of the; Baha’i Calendar and Rhythms of Worship; Baha’i Faith; Baha’i Fast; Baha’u’llah, Ascension of; Baha’u’llah, Festival of the Birth of; Covenant, Day of the; Naw-Ruz, Festival of; Nineteen-Day Feast (Baha’i); Race Unity Day; Ridvan, Festival of.

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