

Sun, moon play roles as calendar changes for different faiths

by Michael Miller

Got new year's plans?

If you're Baha'i, you'd better. Your new year starts at sunset March 21.

And if you're Buddhist, you may have recently observed the Chinese New Year along with others who follow Asian ethnic traditions.

Religious new years are about as varied and numerous as faith traditions themselves.

When a religion celebrates a new year depends typically on the sun and moon, and frequently which new moon or full moon falls during certain positions of the sun.

NEW YEAR - Al Quiros of Peoria, Ill., lights candles following one of 108 soundings of the bell at the Universalist Unitarian Church in Peoria. Quiros and all other attendees took their respectful turn at lighting one of the 108 candles. CNS Photo by Bill Gaither.

For instance, the Jewish religious year starts in spring, usually on the new moon observed after the spring equinox. But the day traditionally known as the Jewish "new year," Rosh Hashanah, falls on the new moon that begins the seventh month. The Chinese new year is observed on the second new moon after the winter solstice. The Baha'i new year is fixed on the spring equinox, something of a throwback to many ancient

cultures. The Christian new year, established by Pope Gregory XIII, whose name is applied to the contemporary Gregorian calendar, occurs shortly after the winter solstice; until that calendar kicked in, all Christians had followed the ancient Roman, or Julian, calendar, with its March new year. The Christian liturgical new year, though, occurs in late fall, beginning with the season of Advent four Sundays before Christmas. Islam's year, though, is strictly lunar, with no leap days or months, and so its new year moves through the solar year, occurring 11 days earlier each year. With their varied cultures and traditions, Hindus celebrate new year at various times, though mostly in spring. The Baha'i New Year, called Naw Ruz in Persian, was set on March 21, the spring equinox, early on in that faith's history, said Mike Truskey, a Baha'i who lives in West Peoria, Ill. It's the teaching of the faith that as mankind becomes more united, it will need a common calendar, and that calendar has been supplied by the faith, he said.

Like most other new years, Naw Ruz is a time for celebration, but nothing as rowdy as the secular Dec. 31-Jan. 1 celebrations, especially since the Baha'i Faith bans consumption of alcohol. With the faith that was founded less than 200 years ago scattered throughout 235 different countries, Truskey said, there are no overriding cultural traditions for observance of the Baha'i new year.

"We don't have a history," he said. "That's a wonderful thing. It's really what culture a Baha'i is coming from" that determines how he or she will celebrate the holiday. Truskey said he's been a Baha'i since 1970 and has been curious in different places he's lived in about how Naw Ruz would be celebrated. For instance, his experience in Springfield, Ill., was a formal dance and party. In the Peoria area, though, he has set up family fun time and food in a local gymnasium. Members of area Baha'i communities also will gather in private homes for dinners, he said.

In addition, the Baha'i new year comes at the conclusion of an annual period of fasting.

Zen Buddhists, meanwhile, celebrate different new years. Some centers hold special services on Dec. 31, while others wait until the Chinese New Year, which was Feb. 18 this year. Either way, said Cate Pfeifer, abbot of the Peoria Zen Center, the tradition is pretty much the same. Starting at a few minutes before midnight there is the ringing of bells 108 times, the lighting of 108 candles, and meditating, bowing and

chanting. The number 108, she said, "is symbolic in our tradition and in most of Buddhism of 108 dusts that cover our eyes. These are the things that blind us to seeing reality as it is." The bells and the light serve as a reminder to wake up "instead of being caught in our fantasies," she said.

Jews have a ways to go before their big new year's observance, though, with Rosh Hashanah usually occurring in late summer or early autumn on the first day of the seventh month of the Jewish year. It's traditionally referred to as the Jewish new year because it's on this day that the year's number changes for Jews, important because the year's number signifies when jubilee and sabbatical years begin. The current year is 5765 since creation.

But it's also on that festival, marked by the blowing of shofars, or ram's horns, that a spiritual renewal should begin, said Rabbi Zalman Stein of St. Louis, a visiting rabbi for Peoria's Congregation Agudas Achim. Ten days after Rosh Hashanah is Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement. "It's a time of review, sort of soul searching," Stein said. "In the liturgy, it's a time when we renew the relationship with God and where we seek reconciliation with people around us."

The new year of trees, called Tu B'shvat, or the 15th day of the biblical month of Shvat, has become more visible among Jews since they started returning to the land of Israel 100 years ago and the planting of trees as part of reclaiming the land became more important, Stein said. Typically occurring in January or February, when trees begin to blossom in Israel, it's tied more to the agricultural cycle, he said. Modern Jews are marking Tu B'shvat with a seder, or ritual meal, where "people try to eat things that are particularly associated with the land of Israel," Stein said.

In ancient times, the first month of the Jewish year, called Aviv or Nissan, also marked the reigns of kings and was known as the new year for festivals, with the spring holiday Passover considered to be the first festival of the year.

And, finally, there's the first of Elul, which falls toward the end of summer and marked the age of cattle, important for a sacrificial system which only would allow the use of cattle of certain ages.

This year's new years

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Jan. 20: Hijra new year (Muslim)

Feb. 3: Tu B'shevat, Jewish new year of trees

Feb. 18: Chinese and Vietnamese new year - Confucian/Daoist/Buddhist

March 19, April 14: Hindu new year

March 20: first day of Jewish month of Aviv or Nisan, new year of kings and festivals

March 21: Baha'i new year

Aug. 15: First day of Jewish month of Elul, used in ancient times to determine age of cattle for tithing purposes

Sept. 13: Rosh Hashanah, Jewish new year, literally "head of the year"

Oct. 11: Annakut, new year for Hindus from north India

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