

Holy Day With No Fixed Date

Athabascan Stick Dance/Potlatch The Alaskan Athabaskan are a Subarctic people who live in an area directly south of the true Arctic regions. Their land stretches from the border of the Canadian Yukon Territory to just beyond the Arctic Circle. They once wandered throughout a vast region, but after Europeans came they built villages of fifty to five hundred people along the Yukon, Koyuckuk, Tanana, and Copper Rivers. Most of them still live in those areas in the early twenty-first century. Few villages have roads leading into them and are reached by boat, snowmobile, or plane.

Two major festivities still held by Alaskan Athabaskans are the potlatch and the stick dance. Both are week-long, gift-giving ceremonies that honor the dead. In the past the Alaskan Athabaskan potlatch might also be held to celebrate a girl's reaching puberty or to call attention to a man's wealth. During the ceremony, tribal members perform their spirit songs and dances, feast, and receive the plentiful gifts distributed by the hosts.

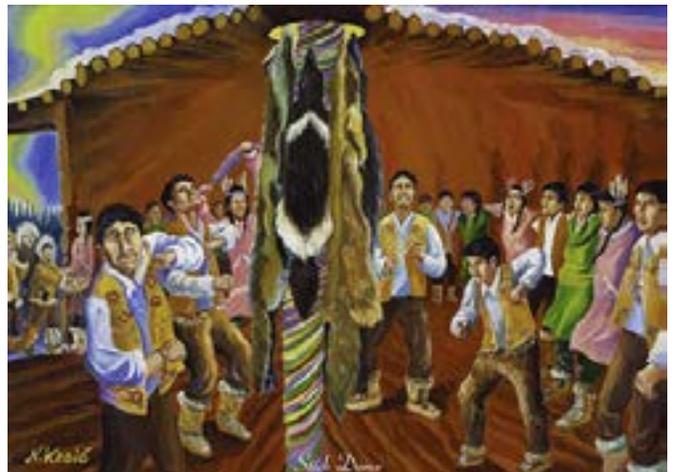
The stick dance is held in March and is hosted by a widow to honor her dead husband. Men carry a fifteen-foot-long pole into the village hall on the fifth evening of the ceremony, and women decorate it with ribbons and furs. Thirteen dances are held with the stick as a focal point. There is much feasting and distributing of gifts. Sometimes the event takes years of planning and saving.

At the end of the event (typically a Saturday) the pole is taken down and carried past each house in the village before being broken up and thrown into the Yukon River, which is usually still frozen at this time of year but which will eventually melt and carry the pole's shattered remains to the sea. The rest of the weekend is devoted to rituals designed to help the living come to terms with their loss. Men who have been specially selected to represent the dead dress up in their clothes and bid a final farewell to their family and friends. Gifts that have been made or purchased by the family are distributed to every person attending the stickdance (see GIFTS) to show appreciation for their friendship and support, and there is more feasting on traditional foods.

Although a few years may elapse between the loss of a loved one and the stickdance that honors his memory, the Athabascan approach to dealing with grief and loss seems to be particularly effective.

Surviving family members say that the opportunity to focus on their memories of the dead and to receive the support of the entire community is a valuable one, and that the stickdance does indeed make it easier for them to let go.

Drawing by Judy Ferguson



Navajo Mountain Chant Navajo religious practices emphasize healing rituals, in terms of curing diseases as well as healing relationships among all living things.

The nine-day Mountain Chant marks a transition in the seasons. It takes place in late winter, at the end of the thunderstorms but before the spring winds arrive. Members of the Navajo Nation believe that if this ceremony were to be held at any other time of year, the result would be death from lightning or snake-bite. The chant is also considered a curing ceremony, performed not only for individuals who are sick, but also to restore order and balance in human relationships.

The legend on which the Mountain Chant is based chronicles the adventures of Dsilyi Neyani, the eldest son of a wandering Navajo family. He is captured by the Utes while hunting one day, but he manages to escape with the help of the gods (known as the Yei). During his long journey to rejoin his family, he encounters many hazards and learns a great deal about magic and ceremonial acts.

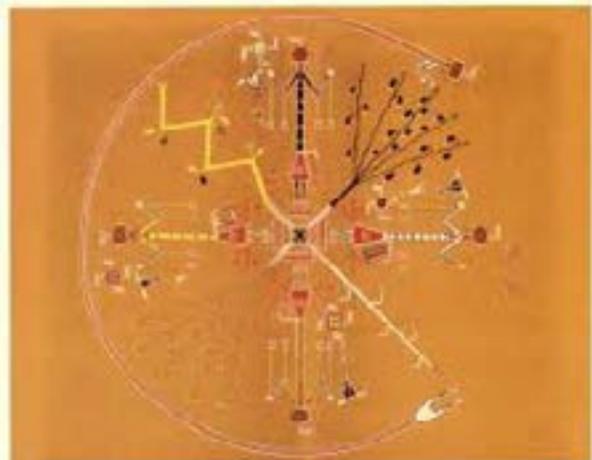
When Dsilyi Neyani returns to his family, he discovers that they have grown into an entire tribe during his long absence. It takes him four days and four nights to tell the story of his wanderings, but the rituals he brings back are so compelling that messengers are immediately sent out to invite guests to witness what he has learned. Even today, the Mountain Chant remains an event to which visitors from outside the Navajo Nation are especially welcome.

The Mountain Chant consists of four ceremonies, all based on the same legend but differing considerably in terms of their presentation and the wording of the songs that are sung. Perhaps the most moving ceremony takes place on the final day. The medicine man emerges from the lodge or hogan at sunset and begins to chant, while a circle of evergreens eight to ten feet tall—each concealing the man who handles it—rises as if by magic and forms a circular enclosure about 100 feet in diameter with only one opening, facing east. The ground within this circle is considered sacred, and there is a cone-shaped bonfire in the center.

The final ceremony begins when the central bonfire is lit. Dancers with their bodies whitened by clay rush into the circle, leaping wildly and waving their arms and legs. They circle the fire from south to west to north and then south again, the white clay on their bodies protecting them from the heat of the flames. Sometimes they throw sumac wands tipped with rings of fluffy eagle down into the fire. The down flares briefly and burns away, but the dancer conceals a second ring of fluff, which he then shakes to the end of the wand, creating the impression that the fluffy ball has been magically restored. A similar illusion is involved in the “yucca trick,” in which a yucca plant appears to grow miraculously from a bare root, then blossoms, and finally reveals its fruit.

The Fire Dance takes place just before dawn, when the central bonfire has burned down to embers. Young men drag in huge trees to feed the central fire, and the dancers make a sound with their tongues that imitates the sound of a hot fire. They carry large bundles of shredded cedar bark, which are ignited with coals from the base of the fire. Once they are burning, the bundles are thrown over the fence to the east first and then in the other three directions. The men dance in a circle around the fire, beating their own and each others’ bodies with the flaming brands. Spectators later gather up bits of the burned cedar, which is believed to offer protection against fire for the coming year.

Sand Painting picture from an 1887 article written by Washington Matthews



Holy Days With Fixed Date

March 2 Nineteen Day Fast Begins Baha'i Bahá'ís practice fasting as a discipline for the soul; they see abstaining from food as an outer symbol of a spiritual fast. By this they mean the practice of self-restraint in order to distance oneself from all the appetites of the body and so concentrate on oneself as a spiritual being and get closer to God.

Abstaining from food is not an end in itself but a symbol, and if it doesn't result in improvements in character and concern for others then it has not been undertaken in the right spirit.

Bahá'u'lláh designated a 19-day period of fasting each year immediately before the Bahá'í New Year. The fasting is seen as a period of spiritual preparation and regeneration for the new year ahead. In the Western calendar, this occurs between 2nd and 21st March (the Bahá'í month of Ala meaning 'loftiness').

The sick, elderly, and very young are exempt from fasting, as are pregnant or nursing mothers, travelers and those doing heavy physical work.

If a Holy Day occurs during the traditional period of fasting, then the fast is not obligatory on those days.

March 3 Transfiguration Christian All three Synoptic Gospels tell the story of the Transfiguration (Matthew 17:1-8; Mark 9:2-9; Luke 9:28-36). With remarkable agreement, all three place the event shortly after Peter's confession of faith that Jesus is the Messiah and Jesus' first prediction of his passion and death. Peter's eagerness to erect tents or booths on the spot suggests it occurred during the week-long Jewish Feast of Booths in the fall.



According to Scripture scholars, in spite of the texts' agreement it is difficult to reconstruct the disciples' experience, because the Gospels draw heavily on Old Testament descriptions of the Sinai encounter with God, and prophetic visions of the Son of Man. Certainly Peter, James, and John had a glimpse of Jesus' divinity strong enough to strike fear into their hearts. Such an experience defies description, so they drew on familiar religious language to describe it. And certainly Jesus warned them that his glory and his suffering were to be inextricably connected—a theme John highlights throughout his Gospel.

Tradition names Mount Tabor as the site of the revelation. A church first raised there in the fourth century was dedicated on August 6. A feast in honor of the Transfiguration was celebrated in the Eastern Church from about that time. Western observance began in some localities about the eighth century.

On July 22, 1456, Crusaders defeated the Turks at Belgrade. News of the victory reached Rome on August 6, and Pope Callistus III placed the feast on the Roman calendar the following year.

March 3 Meatfare Sunday Orthodox Christian Though commonly referred to as Meatfare Sunday, this third Sunday of the Triodion Period is more formally known as the Sunday of the Last Judgment. In services, emphasis is placed on the Second Coming and Last Judgment—a time when Christ, in Matthew, refers to coming in glory with the angels to judge the living and the dead. (Learn more from the Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of America.) While the opportunity exists, the faithful are encouraged to repent. The parable of the Last Judgment points out that Christ will judge on love: How well one has shared God's love, and how deeply one has cared for others.

On the Saturday prior to Meatfare Sunday and on the two Saturdays following, a liturgy and memorial service is held for the faithful departed. These days are known as the Saturdays of the Souls.

Picture: mosaic of the Last Judgment from the Basilica of Sant' Apollinaire Nuovo in Ravenna, Italy.



March 6 Ash Wednesday Christian (Western) Ash Wednesday marks the beginning of the season of Lent. Lent is a time when many Christians prepare for Easter by observing a period of fasting, repentance, moderation and spiritual discipline.

Ash Wednesday emphasizes two themes: our sinfulness before God and our human mortality. The service of the day focuses on both themes, helping people to realize that both have been overcome through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

During some Ash Wednesday services, the minister will lightly rub the sign of the cross with ashes onto the foreheads of worshipers. The use of ashes as a sign of mortality and repentance has a long history in Jewish and Christian worship. Historically, ashes signified purification and sorrow for sins.

It is traditional to save the palm branches from the previous Palm Sunday service to burn to produce ashes for this service.



March 10 Orthodox Sunday Orthodox Christian The Sunday of Orthodoxy is the first Sunday of Great Lent. The dominant theme of this Sunday since 843 has been that of the victory of the icons. In that year the iconoclastic controversy, which had raged on and off since 726, was finally laid to rest, and icons and their veneration were restored on the first Sunday in Lent. Ever since, this Sunday has been commemorated as the "Triumph of Orthodoxy."

Historical Background: The Seventh Ecumenical Council dealt predominantly with the controversy regarding icons and their place in Orthodox worship. It was convened in Nicaea in 787 by Empress Irene at the request of Tarasios, Patriarch of Constantinople. The Council was attended by 367 bishops.



Almost a century before this, the iconoclastic controversy had once more shaken the foundations of both Church and State in the Byzantine empire.

Excessive religious respect and the ascribed miracles to icons by some members of society, approached the point of worship (due only to God) and idolatry. This instigated excesses at the other extreme by which icons were completely taken out of the liturgical life of the Church by the Iconoclasts. The Iconophiles, on the other-hand, believed that icons served to preserve the doctrinal teachings of the Church; they considered icons to be man's dynamic way of expressing the divine through art and beauty.

The Council decided on a doctrine by which icons should be venerated but not worshipped. In answering the Empress' invitation to the Council, Pope Hadrian replied with a letter in which he also held the position of extending veneration to icons but not worship, the last befitting only God.

Icon celebrating Orthodox Sunday from oca.org

March 11 Clean Monday Orthodox Christian Clean Monday is the first day of Great Lent, as Eastern Catholics and Eastern Orthodox refer to the Lenten season. For both Eastern Catholics and Eastern Orthodox, Clean Monday falls on the Monday of the seventh week before Easter Sunday; for Eastern Catholics, that places Clean Monday two days before Western Christians celebrate Ash Wednesday.

The date on which Eastern Orthodox celebrate Clean Monday is usually different from that on which Eastern Catholics celebrate it. That's because the date of Clean Monday depends on the date of Easter, and the Eastern Orthodox figure the date of Easter using the Julian calendar.

Clean Monday is sometimes referred to as Ash Monday, especially among Maronite Catholics, an Eastern Catholic rite rooted in Lebanon. Over the years, the Maronites adopted the Western habit of distributing ashes on the first day of Lent, but since Great Lent began for the Maronites on Clean Monday rather than Ash Wednesday, they distributed the ashes on Clean Monday, and so they began to call the day Ash Monday. (With minor exceptions, no other Eastern Catholics or Eastern Orthodox distribute ashes on Clean Monday.) On Clean Monday and throughout Great Lent, Eastern Catholics frequently pray the Prayer of St. Ephrem the Syrian.

Clean Monday is a reminder that people should begin Lent with good intentions and a desire to clean one's spiritual house. Clean Monday is a day of strict fasting for Eastern Catholics and Eastern Orthodox, including abstinence not only from meat but from eggs and dairy products as well.

March 17 St. Patrick Christian Legends about Patrick abound; but truth is best served by our seeing two solid qualities in him: He was humble and he was courageous. The determination to accept suffering and success with equal indifference guided the life of God's instrument for winning most of Ireland for Christ.

Details of his life are uncertain. Current research places his dates of birth and death a little later than earlier accounts. Patrick may have been born in Dunbarton, Scotland, Cumberland, England, or in northern Wales. He called himself both a Roman and a Briton. At 16, he and a large number of his father's slaves and vassals were captured by Irish raiders and sold as slaves in Ireland. Forced to work as a shepherd, he suffered greatly from hunger and cold.

After six years Patrick escaped, probably to France, and later returned to Britain at the age of 22. His captivity had meant spiritual conversion. He may have studied at Lerins, off the French coast; he spent years at Auxerre, France, and was consecrated bishop at the age of 43. His great desire was to proclaim the good news to the Irish.

Because of the island's pagan background, Patrick was emphatic in encouraging widows to remain chaste and young women to consecrate their virginity to Christ. He ordained many priests, divided the country into dioceses, held Church councils, founded several monasteries and continually urged his people to greater holiness in Christ.

He suffered much opposition from pagan druids and was criticized in both England and Ireland for the way he conducted his mission. In a relatively short time, the island had experienced deeply the Christian spirit, and was prepared to send out missionaries whose efforts were greatly responsible for Christianizing Europe.

Patrick was a man of action, with little inclination toward learning. He had a rock-like belief in his vocation, in the cause he had espoused. One of the few certainly authentic writings is his *Confessio*, above all an act of homage to God for having called Patrick, unworthy sinner, to the apostolate.



March 20 Ostara/Equinox Wicca/Pagan Ostara is one of 8 neopagan sabbats, or holidays, that make up the Wheel of the Year. Along with Ostara, many Wiccans and neopagans observe Beltane, Litha (or summer solstice), Lughnasadh, the autumnal equinox, Samhain, Yule and Imbolc. Ostara may be a contemporary revival of ancient spring festivals.

Some pagan authors say Ostara derives from ancient Celtic and Saxon spring holidays, later Christianized into the Easter holiday. Others argue this and other neopagan holidays are modern creations. Either way, many religions celebrate holidays during this time of year, including the Hindu Holi, Jewish Purim, Sikh Holi Mohalla and Christian Easter.

For many neopagans, Ostara celebrates the Spring Maiden and Horned God who represent the characteristics of the new season.

Ostara, or Eostra, is an Anglo-Saxon goddess who represents dawn. As a spring goddess she oversees the budding plants and burgeoning fertility of the earth. The Horned God, sometimes envisioned as the god Pan, symbolizes the festive enjoyment of nature through hunting and dancing.

Symbols of fertility and new life play a prominent role in many Ostara celebrations. Similar to those observed at Easter, symbols for Ostara include eggs, rabbits, flowers and seeds. Many neopagans believe these symbols to represent the fecundity of spring and incorporate them into rituals, altars and celebratory feasts. Photo: from The Green Man Store



March 20-21 Purim Jewish Purim is celebrated with a public reading—usually in the synagogue—of the Book of Esther (M'gillat Esther), which tells the story of the holiday. Under the rule of King Ahashverosh, Haman, the king's prime minister, plots to exterminate all of the Jews of Persia. His plan is foiled by Queen Esther and her cousin Mordechai, who ultimately save the Jews of Persia from destruction. The reading of the m'gillah typically is a rowdy affair, punctuated by booing and noise-making when Haman's name is read aloud.

Purim is an unusual holiday in many respects. First, Esther is the only biblical book in which God is not mentioned. Second, Purim, like Hanukkah, traditionally is viewed as a minor festival, but elevated to a major holiday as a result of the Jewish historical experience. Over the centuries, Haman became the embodiment of every anti-Semite in every land where Jews were oppressed. The significance of Purim lies not so much in how it began, but in what it has become: a thankful and joyous affirmation of Jewish survival against all odds.

In the Book of Esther, we read that Purim is a time for "feasting and merrymaking," as well as for "sending gifts to one another and presents to the poor" (Esther 9:22). In addition to reading the M'gillah (Book of Esther), celebrants dress in costumes, have festive parties, perform "Purim-spiels," silly theatrical adaptations of the story of the M'gillah, send baskets of food (mishloach manot) to friends, and give gifts to the poor (matanot l'evyonim).

Hamantaschen (Yiddish for Haman's pockets) are three-cornered pastries filled with poppy seeds (mohn in Yiddish), fruit preserves, chocolate, or other ingredients that are traditionally eaten on Purim. In Israel during the weeks leading up to Purim, the aroma of freshly baked hamantaschen can be smelled on every block. Their triangular shape is thought to be reminiscent of Haman's hat or ears.



March 21 Norouz/Nawruz Zoroastrian/Baha'i Nowruz, known as the Persian new year, is one of the most ancient celebrations in history and has been celebrated for around 4000 years in what is now Iran and in the extended cultural area known as Greater Iran. It is an ancient celebration with the spring equinox as the main event occurring on 20 or 21 March every year. During ancient times, Persian kings greatly emphasized the importance of this event and invited people from around the empire who were of different ethnicities and followers of different religions, to the royal court for celebrations and receiving gifts. After thousands of years, Nowruz remains to be the most important celebration for Iranians as well as for around 300 million people in the neighboring countries of Iran, who together celebrate the arrival of spring and the rebirth of nature.

Nowruz is the Persian name of the Persian new year consisting of two words; Now or no meaning new and ruz or rooz meaning day, which when put together means new day . This celebration and its associated events has been celebrated for thousands of years by the people of Iran and the people of Central Asian countries, former parts of ancient Persian empires. Nowruz emerged as people of these areas of the world left the nomadic life and established settlements which started a new phase in human civilization. Today, it is the world's only event which is celebrated at the exact same moment throughout the world. The celebration is not connected to religion and is based on astronomical celestial events even though Nowruz is deeply rooted in Zoroastrianism, the ancient Persian religion.

The Baha'i celebration of Naw-Ruz is one of the nine Baha'i Holy Days on which work is suspended, and it was established by Baha'u'llah, the prophet-founder of the Baha'i Faith, to mark the feast day following the 19-day month of fasting. (The Baha'i calendar is made up of nineteen months, and each month consists of nineteen days). The Baha'i fast is essentially a reflective time of year, where those who are able, abstain from food and drink between sunrise and sunset. To Baha'is the new year also symbolizes the renewal of time in each religious dispensation.

As with most Baha'i Holy Days, there are no particular fixed rituals or practices associated with the holiday. With adherents from so many parts of the world, the Baha'i Faith makes careful attention not to impose one cultural tradition upon other traditions but rather to encourage an organic international Baha'i culture that emerges based on the Holy Texts and not on personal or cultural traditions. So, on an international level, the celebration is generally observed with a meeting consisting of prayers, feasting and joyful celebration open to all. What that actually looks like from one place to another largely depends on the way in which a Baha'i family or community chooses to celebrate the Holy Day.



March 21 Hola Mohalla Sikh Guru Gobind Singh started this festival as a day for Sikhs to practice their military exercises and hold mock battles.

Today, Sikhs celebrate by watching and partaking in martial arts parades, led by the nishan sahibs of the Gurdwaras. These are followed by poetry readings and music.

March 21 Magha Puja Buddhist Magha Puja is also known as the Full Moon Day. It is a Buddhist festival that is celebrated by Buddhists in various nations on the third lunar month to commemorate four good things that happened in their history about 2,500 years ago.

The main reasons why this festival is celebrated include: Around 1,250 Buddhist monks met spontaneously without any prior planning, the 1,250 Buddhist were enlightened monks, every one of them was ordained personally by the Buddha. All this happened on full moon, the first in March which is the month of Magha Buddhists Celebrate Magha Puja Day.



In some instances, the Magha Puja Day is also referred to as Fourfold Assembly Day because of the four things that happened. The initial large Buddhist gatherings were held only a few months after Buddhist enlightenment. The second one came after 45 years only three months prior to Buddha's death. The recent Magha Puja Day happened a time when Buddha called his disciple Ananda and informed him that his is going to die after a period of three months. Therefore, the festival is used to commemorate important teachings of the Buddha.

Buddhists gather at temple at dusk where they make merry, share flowers, incense and lit candles. They celebrate the day by lighting candles and moving in a circle three times around the temple's main hall in honor of the Three Jewels of Buddhism: the Buddha, Sangha and the Dharma.

March 25 *Annunciation of the Blessed Virgin Mary Catholic Christian* The feast of the Annunciation marks the visit of the angel Gabriel to the Virgin Mary, during which he told her that she would be the mother of Jesus Christ, the Son of God. It is celebrated on 25 March each year.

More importantly, since it occurs 9 months before the birth of Jesus on Christmas Day, the Annunciation marks the actual incarnation of Jesus Christ - the moment that Jesus was conceived and that the Son of God became the son of the Virgin. The festival has been celebrated since the 5th century AD.

The festival celebrates two things: God's action in entering the human world as Jesus in order to save humanity, Humanity's willing acceptance of God's action in Mary's freely given acceptance of the task of being the Mother of God

March 28 *Khordad Sal Zoroastrian* Khordad Sal is celebrated as the birthday of Zoroaster. This is known as the 'Greater Noruz' and happens six days after Noruz. The chosen date is symbolic since the actual date of the Prophet's birth cannot be identified accurately.

This festival is considered one of the most important in the Zoroastrian calendar. Zoroastrians gather in Fire temples for prayers and then celebrate with feasting.

Sources for this newsletter include: encyclopedia.com, thefreedictionary.com, bbc.co.uk, franciscanmedia.org, readthespirit.com, umc.org, geoarch.org, thoughtco.com, huffingtonpost.com, reformjudaism.org, ancient-origins.net, baha'iblog.net, worldreligionnews.com. All the pictures are from the subscription service Shutterstock unless otherwise identified.

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Catholic Mass is held Thursday at noon and Saturday at 4 pm in the Main Chapel, third floor Main, room 3201.

Jummah Prayer is held Friday at 12:15 pm in the Main Chapel, third floor Main, room 3201.