

## INTERFAITH INSIGHT

# New Year's an opportunity for reorientation

**Kyle Kooyers** *Program manager, Kaufman Interfaith Institute*

What does New Year's mean spiritually?

Culturally speaking, New Year's in the United States is a time of parties, watching college football bowl games, making ambitious resolutions around personal health and happiness, and, of course, staying up to watch that glitzy ball drop at midnight. While our celebration of the new year on Jan. 1 can be traced back to the Julian calendar in 45 BCE, with modifications made up until the Gregorian calendar in 1582, we are still left with this question. For an answer, we might look to the wisdom of different traditions to see when, why, and how they mark the beginning of the new year.

In the Islamic tradition, Ra's al-Sanah al-Hijriyah, or the Hijri New Year, marks the beginning of the year. Taking place first day of Muharram, the first month of the lunar Islamic calendar, it moves ahead each year in the Gregorian calendar and thus occurs at various times through the year. During this month of remembrance, with the Day of Ashura being the 10th and most sacred day of the month, some Muslims make pilgrimages to commemorate and recall Prophet Muhammad's emigration from Mecca to Medina, while others may choose to fast, give charity or attend evening prayer.

With a similar theme of remembrance and reflection, Rosh Hashana, which means "the head of the year," is often referred to as the Jewish New Year. Taking place on the first day of the month of Tishrei, which usually falls in September or October, this holiday is a time of introspection, where one reflects upon the previous year and plans to make changes for the year to come. This time, often associated with the creation of the world, is marked with a blowing of the shofar (a ram's horn), no work, attending synagogue and eating apples dipped in honey, which anticipate a sweet new year.

About the same time, Orthodox Christians mark the first day of September, referred to as Indiction, as the begin-



**This column was written by Kyle Kooyers, program manager for the Kaufman Interfaith Institute.**

ning of the church year. Similar to Rosh Hashanah, this day is associated with the creation of the earth, with the added Christian emphasis of the day that Jesus began his ministry. The occasion is marked by prayers and action for the environment, with thanksgiving for the abundance and provision of good weather and harvest over the past year. For Western Christians, Advent, beginning the fourth Sunday before Christmas, begins the new year.

In the Baha'i faith, Naw-Rúz is the beginning of the new year. This day falls on the first day of the month of Baha, on the spring equinox, in mid- to late March. Called "The Day of God," Naw-Rúz follows the Nineteen Day Fast as a festival for those who had completed the fast. With focus on renewal, this time acknowledges the coming of spring and the newness of life that comes with the messages of the nine manifestations of God, including Jesus, Muhammad, and Bahá'u'lláh. Work is halted as music, prayer, dancing, and food mark the occasion.

Vaisakhi, sometimes called Baisakhi, is a new year festival celebrated in Punjab in April by Hindus and Sikhs. For some Hindus, this is an ancient celebration marking the spring harvest, the solar new year and the sacredness of rivers. Hindus may bathe in rivers, such as the Ganges, visit temples, meet family and friends and share festive foods. For Sikhs, in addition to a harvest festival, Vaisakhi is a celebration commemorating several significant events, including the birth of the Sikh order and the coronation of the 10th Guru. Sikhs also bathe in bodies of water, holding kirtans,

fairs and processions where people can gather and eat.

The Buddhist tradition, like Hinduism, has different celebrations of the new year depending on country, region or ethnic background. In Tibet, The Buddhist New Year, which may fall in February or March, is referred to as Losar. Lasting for three days, this celebration progresses from being with family on the first day to being with friends on the second and third days. People may visit decorated monasteries to seek purity and cleanliness, while also cleaning their homes, buying new clothes and preparing feasts.

In the spirit of cleansing, this insight would be remiss to not mention the Chinese New Year. While not tied to any one specific religious or spiritual tradition, the Spring Festival begins on the new moon that falls between mid-January and mid-February. This huge celebration honors deities in the home and in the heavenly realm. One might celebrate the Spring Festival with reunion dinners with family, relaxation from work, house cleaning to rid oneself of ill-fortune and bad luck, red decorations of happiness and good fortune, giving of money, and, of course, firecrackers and fireworks.

Whether we are talking about remembrance, thanksgiving, waiting, renewal, celebration, cleanliness or preparation, each of these New Year's traditions offers us a reorientation. Our attentions are turned toward that which is most important — the presence of family, the presence of friends and the presence of divine work. As we consider our own work this year, perhaps we might seek a reorientation to the people around us, to those with whom we live as neighbors in this beautiful thing we call community.

Even though the midnight hour of Jan. 1 has passed, perhaps we can still make one simple resolution — to make a new friend, one of a different faith or worldview, in order that our shared life might be a little bit richer in 2018.

[interfaith@gvsu.edu](mailto:interfaith@gvsu.edu)