

# INTERFAITH MAINE

## WINTER NEWSLETTER

### 2008-2009



[www.interfaithmaine.us](http://www.interfaithmaine.us)

## Dinner-Discussions Schedule

*Through the profoundly simple act of sharing a meal and table conversation, we invite people of all faiths to come together and find friendship, learning around a theme of shared interest, and common ground for our life together in community.*

### “Religion and Politics”

*What stake do we as people of faith have in the 2008 state and national elections?*

Saturday, September 20, 4-6 PM  
Portland Friends’ Meeting, 837 Forest Avenue, Portland

### “Gratitude”

*At this time of national Thanksgiving, what do our religions teach about gratitude?*

Sunday, November 16, 4-6 PM, Temple Shalom, 74 Bradman Street, Auburn

*(Out of respect for Kosher dietary requirements, dishes brought to this dinner should be vegetarian and/or dairy, with no meat of any kind)*

*Interfaith Maine is a non-profit organization dedicated to “seeking peace and justice through deepening interfaith relationships and understanding.” We believe that by building community among people of diverse faith traditions, we are building bridges that will enable us to work together to create peace and justice, beginning with our own homes and communities, and moving outward into the world. We are based in Portland, Maine, and invite people from all over the state (and beyond!) to join us in creating an ever-enlarging circle of friendship and faith.*

### “Darkness And Light”

Exploring religious teachings about darkness and light at this dark and cold time of year.

Sunday, February 8, 2009, 4-6 PM  
Allen Avenue Unitarian Universalist Church, 524 Allen Avenue, Portland

### “Fasting and Feasting”

Dietary practices that are part of many of our traditions at this time of year.

Sunday, April 19, 4-6 PM  
First Parish United Church of Christ, Maine Street at Bath Road, Brunswick

All meals are “pot luck.” Please bring a dish of any sort to share. Table service and beverages will be provided. For more information and to let us know you’re coming, please e-mail [Interfaith Maine](mailto:Interfaith@interfaithmaine.us)

*Everybody loves a festival, and celebrations are a fun and accessible way to begin to learn about one another’s religious traditions and practices. Here is a partial list of significant religious observances that take place in the fall and winter of the year among religious communities found here in Maine. Enjoy!*

October 28<sup>th</sup> is the beginning of the five day Hindu festival of *Diwali*, also known as the Festival of Lights. It is dedicated to Lakshmi, the Goddess of prosperity, and the celebration includes the illumination of many clay lamps which line the rooftops and are floated down rivers, giving the holiday its name, literally “rows of lighted lamps.”

October 31<sup>st</sup>, Halloween in popular American culture, is the Celtic Pagan observance of *Samhain* (pronounced “sow-en.”) It is the half-way point between the autumnal equinox and the winter solstice, the third and final harvest celebration, and therefore the last day of the old year. As (in the northern hemisphere, from whence these traditions originate) the earth is “dying,” so Samhain includes emphasis on mortal death, and is believed to be the time when the veil between this world and the next is thinnest. It is therefore easy to see why the popular emphasis on things that “pierce the veil” between the living and the dead persists.

November 1<sup>st</sup>, with the Christianization of the Roman Empire, became the Christian observance of *All Saints Day*, and of *All Souls Day* on November 2 (the difference in tradition being those beatified celebrated on All Saints and all others on All Souls). Many Christian traditions still observe these days as occasions for remembering and celebrating the lives of people of faith who have died and the nearness and inspiration of their spirits.

November 12, is the Baha’i observance of the *Birth of Baha’ u’llah*. Born in Persia (modern day Iran,) he was the prophet-founder of the Baha’i Faith. His teachings focus on the unity of (Con’t on p.2)

## Festivals & Celebrations (con't)

all religions and the kindred of all humanity.

November 15<sup>th</sup>, is the beginning of the **Nativity Fast** for members of the Orthodox, or Eastern Rite, branches of Christianity. It is a 40 day period of fasting, penitence, and reflection in preparation for the celebration of the Nativity of Jesus, or Christmas.

November 27<sup>th</sup> is **Thanksgiving**, a national holiday with religious overtones, celebrated by most in the U.S. as a time to reflect upon and celebrate with gratitude the bounty of the earth and of our own lives. It dates to a harvest festival in 1621 in the community of early settlers known as Pilgrims. In 1863, President Abraham Lincoln declared an annual day of Thanksgiving on the last Thursday in November, and in 1941, Congress declared Thanksgiving a legal holiday on the 4<sup>th</sup> Thursday of November.

November 26 is the **Day of the Covenant** in the Baha'i Faith. It celebrates the Covenant given in the last will and testament of Baha'u'llah, the prophet founder of the Baha'i faith, which emphasizes universal fellowship and the unity of humankind.

December 6<sup>th</sup> marks the beginning of the **Hajj**, the pilgrimage of Muslims to the holy city of Mecca in Saudi Arabia. Every adult Muslim is obligated to make the pilgrimage at least once in her or his lifetime if physically and financially able to do so. The Hajj is the fifth of the required practices known as the Five Pillars of Islam. The others are: confession of faith in God and in the prophet Muhammad; ritual worship (Selat) five times daily; giving of alms for the poor; and fasting during Ramadan.

December 9<sup>th</sup> is **Eid al Adha**, celebrated at the conclusion of the Hajj by Muslims whether making

the pilgrimage or not. It commemorates the ransom with a ram of Ibrahim's son Ishmael, whom Allah (God) had required as a sacrifice, honoring Ishmael's willingness to be obedient to Allah.

December 21<sup>st</sup> winter officially begins with the **Winter Solstice**, marking the longest night followed by the shortest day of the year. It was and is observed by ancient and contemporary Pagans, following earth-reverencing spiritual paths, as Yule, which literally means "wheel," referring to the turning of the wheel of the year, from the Dark Time to the Time of Strengthening Light. In the Pagan Roman Empire, these traditions were reflected in the festival of Saturnalia, dedicated to the god Saturn, which became a full week of celebration, perhaps the basis of the traditional "Twelve Days of Christmas," as Rome became Christian by Constantine's fiat.

December 22<sup>nd</sup> begins the eight day Jewish festival of Lights, **Hanukkah**. It celebrates the Jewish victory over the Syrians and the rededication of the Temple in Jerusalem in 164 BCE. The Talmud tells that in seeking to relight the sanctuary lamp, or menorah, for the rededication, the Maccabees found they had only enough oil to burn for one day. Miraculously, the oil lasted for eight days, providing time enough to prepare more. During the Hanukkah celebration, the eight candles of the menorah are lit, one each night, commemorating the eight-day miracle.

December 25<sup>th</sup> is **Christmas** (or the Feast of the Nativity in Orthodox Christian communities). Although controversial in early Christian history and popularized and secularized in American culture, it centers in the celebration of the birth of Jesus, in Bethlehem in Judea, about 3 CE. He was a descendant of the great King David of Israel, and seen as heir to David's throne, embraced by Christians as Messiah, the anointed one or incarnation of God, whose teachings are of justice and peace.

December 26<sup>th</sup> is the first day of **Kwanzaa**, a contemporary and uniquely African American

movement and the desire of African Americans to reconnect with the values and traditions of their African ancestry. Using Swahili, which is the trade, or common language among Africans, Kwanzaa celebrates seven principles, or Nguzo Saba ("en-goo-zoh sah-bah"), which are: Umoja, which is Unity; Kujichagulai, meaning Self-Determination; Ujima, which is Collective Work and Responsibility; Ujamaa, meaning cooperative Economics; Nia ("nee-ah"), or Purpose; Kuumba, which is Creativity; and Imani, meaning Faith. Each of the principles is symbolized by one of the seven candles in the Kinnara, which are lighted progressively throughout the seven day festival, which emphasizes family and community gatherings.

December 29<sup>th</sup> is the first day of the first month of the Islamic calendar, **Muharram**. As the start of the new year, it is observed as sacred, second only to Ramadan, and some Muslims fast during this month as well.

January 6<sup>th</sup> is the Christian **Feast of the Epiphany**, celebrating the Three Kings, or Magi, who traveled from "the East" to pay homage to the recently-born Jesus. They were likely Zoroastrian astrologers from Persia, whose study of the stars suggested to them the birth of an important ruler in Judea "Epiphany" means "manifestation," referring to the manifestation of the messiahship of Jesus to the world beyond Judah.

Continued on next page.

January 7<sup>th</sup> is observed as **Ashura**, particularly among Shi'ite Muslims. Although there are differing traditions about its origins, it was declared by Muhammad in 622 CE as a day of ritual atonement. It later came to commemorate the martyrdom of Husayn (Hussain), son of Ali and grandson of Muhammad, in 680 CE in Karbala.

January 18<sup>th</sup> is the Baha'i observance of **World Religions Day**. It is observed on the third Sunday in January by Baha'is in the US and increasingly around the world, in celebration of their belief in the oneness of all humanity and the unity of all religions.

January 19<sup>th</sup> is **Martin Luther King, Jr. Day**, a national and cultural holiday commemorating the birthday of the late American Civic Rights leader. He was a Christian minister whose non-violent opposition to racial segregation and discrimination was at the heart of the movement that brought about civil rights legislation and reform across the US. Signed into law as a federal holiday in 1983, the observed with retrospective and future-oriented activities around civil rights in particular and human rights in general, and with service activities to address poverty, which Dr. King identified as an urgent issue in our country.

**February 9<sup>th</sup>** is **Tu B'Shevat**, literally "15<sup>th</sup> of (the Hebrew month of) Shevat," observed as the New Year of Trees. Its origin is in the determination of a point in time at which to measure the produce of a given tree for purposes of determining the tithe, or one-tenth to be given as an offering. It has come to be a kind of Jewish Arbor Day, and is observed with the planting of trees in Israel, as with an adapted Seder, or ritual meal, for the occasion.

**February 2** is the ancient and contemporary Pagan observance of **Imbolc**. It is the cross-quarter day, half way between the Winter Solstice and the Spring Equinox, and so it marks a turning of the wheel of the year and celebrates the strengthening light and warmth, and is observed with the lighting of candles and fires. Embraced particularly among Celtic cultures, it was dedicated to Brigid (also known as Brighid, Bríde, Brigit, Bríd) is the goddess of poetry,

healing and smithcraft.

As Celtic lands were Christianized, Imbolc was adopted as **St. Brigid's Day**, also known as **Candlemas**, celebrated in some Christian communities on February 2. Also observed with the lighting of candles, it is dedicated to Mary, who, like Brigid, was revered as a divine mother figure, and commemorates her ritual purification according to Jewish custom, 40 days after the birth of her son, Jesus.

Also on February 2 is the cultural celebration of **Groundhog's Day**. European traditions around Candlemas, brought to the United States by Pennsylvania Dutch, included the belief that the weather on Candlemas predicted the advent of spring:

**If Candlemas  
be fair and  
bright, winter  
has another  
flight;  
If Candlemas  
brings clouds  
and rain,  
winter will not  
come again.**

**Compiled by Andrea Thompson  
McCall, IM Board member and  
Interfaith Chaplain, University of  
Southern Maine.**



### **MeFAR and Inter-Religious Cooperation**

Contact:  
IM Board member  
and Interfaith Chaplain  
Fran Bagdasarian

In March 2007 Interfaith Maine played an important role facilitating a group of faith and human/civil rights leaders who met several times to discuss the need for better communication. This need seemed particularly focused to when a response is required to address incidents of hate or bias in Maine. IM Board member, Jonathan Reitman guided the first gathering of twenty-three participants with good results. Following that meeting, the Maine Council of Churches, Rev. Jill Saxby, Rabbi Hillel Katzir of Temple Shalom, Auburn and Fran Bagdasarian, Board member of both Interfaith Maine and the MCC formed the Steering Committee for Maine Faith Action Response (MeFAR). MeFAR is NOT an organization; it is an email group for those who care about justice, peace, and nondiscrimination. While the first participants in MeFAR are faith community leaders, anyone who agrees to adhere to the guidelines may join. To request an invitation to join MeFAR, go to <http://groups.google.com/group/MeFAR>.

## *The Meaning of Pilgrimage*

By Interfaith Board member Robert Atkinson

*Bob is a member of the Baha'i Faith, a professor at the University of Southern Maine teaching human development, culture and diversity, and religious studies courses, the director of the Center for the Study of Lives at USM, and the author of numerous books.*

I'd like to offer a brief and very personal glimpse into a Baha'i pilgrimage by sharing with you an excerpt from the Epilogue of my recently published memoir, *Remembering 1969: Searching for the Eternal in Changing Times*.

“One other recent event has brought my adventures of 1969 full circle. In late May of 2007, I realized the fulfillment of the end of my dream at the monastery (p. 94-99) on my Bahá'í pilgrimage to the Holy Land. Upon this hallowed ground, in the valley of Acre, Israel, and on nearby Mt. Carmel, I walked in the footsteps of the prophets of God, experiencing directly a spiritual heritage common to all. A pilgrimage to Israel, a unique spiritual journey in itself, confirmed the reality of the concept of evolution in religion.

I approached this pilgrimage, a gift beyond all others, with humbleness and devotion... to meditate in the tranquility of these holy precincts in order to listen and absorb as much as was possible...

Our group of over 200 pilgrims from all parts of the world circumambulated the golden-domed Shrine of the Báb in silent prayer. On the same level as this majestic edifice, and extending outward above it and below it, are nineteen beautifully landscaped terraces, a heavenly path from the mountaintop to the city of Haifa below.

Surrounded by exquisite gardens, this blessed spot is set apart from all others, with verdant trees and plants, colorful flowers of sweet scents, and fountains of flowing water. This vision of paradise exists solely for the praise of the Divine; its

beauty and magnificence is a symbol of the transformation that the hearts of humanity, and even the entire world, will someday undergo...

Another day, sitting alone in the Shrine of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, for a brief but timeless moment, one to carry with me through all eternity, deep in meditation, I became lost in the remembrance of God...

And in the faces of my fellow pilgrims, I beheld an inner joy, instilled by the precious bounty we all shared, even though it could more than a lifetime before we would fully appreciate its significance for us. We all shared, as well, that which we each treasured most, the advent of divine justice, the unity and prosperity of humankind, and the promise of world peace.

IM Board welcomes Pirun Sen as New Member. Pirun is a member of the Buddhist community in Portland and works for the Portland School District. We welcome Pirun and look forward to sharing our work with him.



**With help from Interfaith Maine Board member Cynthia Jane Collins, Portland's Habitat for Humanity has been building an Interfaith House. For more information, contact Cynthia at [oldelucy@gmail.com](mailto:oldelucy@gmail.com).**



*Cynthia Jane Collins is an Associate Chaplain (Pagan) at the University of Southern Maine, and Chair of the Licensure, Ordination and Recognition Committee of Maine Pagan Clergy Association. She is a Founding Elder of Silver Cauldron (Covenstead 1994), and a member of Interfaith Maine's Board since 2002.*



## ***A Brief History of Interfaith Maine***

Interfaith Maine grew out of the work of the Portland Interfaith Seminar, which was a collaboration of the University of Southern Maine, Bangor Theological Seminary, and St. Joseph's College of Maine, beginning in May 2001. In its early days, it had an academic focus, and brought together scholars and teachers to explore the implications of the still-new emergence of religious diversity in Maine. There were over 30 participants in the initial gatherings, convened by Dr. Andrew Grannell, then-Director of the Portland Campus, Bangor Theological Seminary, and Dr. Abraham Peck, Director of the Academic Council for Post-Holocaust Jewish and Christian Studies at the University of Southern Maine.

During the summer of 2001 the Portland Interfaith Seminar began plans for an event to support "trialogue" among Jews, Christians and Muslims living in Maine.

After the attacks of September 11, 2001, the imperative of interfaith relations became more acutely clear and with support from the Maine Council on the Humanities and all three of its founding institutions, the Portland Interfaith Seminar presented a symposium, "The Children of Abraham Downeast: Christians, Jews and Muslims Living in Maine" on March 3, 2002. The event included a keynote by Harvard Professor Diana Eck, author of "A New Religious America," responses by Imam Talal Eid of the New England Islamic Center and Professor David Gordis on Hebrew College, a variety of workshops on various aspects of religious pluralism, and a shared meal with concluding panel to consider next steps for our community.

Following the excitement and energy generated by the symposium, there was a long period of consideration about the direction of the Portland Interfaith Seminar. What has emerged is a decidedly grassroots approach to building relationships among lay people as well as religious leaders from the widest circle of religious and spiritual traditions in Maine.

IM Board Chair Jonathan Reitman and Board member Dawud Ummah have been our representatives to the Martin Luther King Commemoration Task Force. At the urging of Portland City Councilor Dan Skolnik, the City Council appointed a Task Force to evaluate which public spaces or buildings might be named to honor Dr. King and his legacy. Under the co-leadership of Rachel Talbot-Ross, Portland's multicultural affairs officer, the Task Force reviewed many possibilities and will submit a report to the City Council in December. The Task Force will recommend that the Bayside Trail (construction to begin in spring, 2009) include a Martin Luther King Peace Plaza. The Task Force will recommend that the City council appoint an ongoing commission to help Portland Trails designers create a place of contemplation within the trail. Stay tuned for more details.



**BECOME A MEMBER OF INTERFAITH MAINE!**

**Name** \_\_\_\_\_

**Address** \_\_\_\_\_

**Email** \_\_\_\_\_

**Phone** \_\_\_\_\_

**Membership is normally \$25, but the Board has determined that we do not want financial hardship to be a barrier to involvement, so please contribute what you can to:**

**Interfaith Maine**

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