

Holy Pride

Exploration of Pride and Bahá'í Holy Days

Memorial and Commemoration

Summary

In general, those ignorant of (and often apathetic toward) the history of the persecution of Queer people think of Pride as a hedonistic and debaucherous display of perverted lust that has no place in a proper and dignified society. These feelings often manifest in both self-righteous statements begging the listener to reflect on the potential exposure of such activities to children, and, in more extreme cases, violent and sometimes murderous assaults on participants. In truth, Pride, as all things in life, is more nuanced than its most public face.

As we know, Bahá'ís are exhorted to independently investigate the truth. Pride did not begin as it is known today. Pride was a civil protest. Pride was a riot.. Its advent was in the 1960s CE (117 - 127 BE), in the United States, at a time when it was against the law to show any form of Queer expression, in private or in public. Social policing was so stringent that if a woman were to dress too masculinely, or two men were to associate in a public space in ways considered "too friendly," they could face discrimination both socially or have the police called for them. Queer people gathered in secret just to live, to interact, in worship, in recreation, in fellowship. Filling a niche, many public places that catered to Queer clientele were owned by organized crime. They provided spaces for Queer people to live their honest lives that in all other contexts must be kept private not only by law, but also for their physical and social protection. As such, raids on such establishments, in particular gay bars, were common. Oftentimes, if a raid was planned, owing to connections between the police and the criminal owners of the bar, patrons had often been warned before it began. On 28 June, 1969 CE (6 Raḥmat 117 BE), that system failed. Police raided the Stonewall Inn, a gay bar in Greenwich Village. Sources vary as to whether the venue had advance warning from the police, but it is agreed upon that the patrons themselves were not warned. Patrons were rounded up and separated by apparent gender, and women police officers were directed to *verify* the gender of any female presenting individuals via visual genital examination. That night, the patrons resisted the invasive treatment and male presenting patrons refused to show identification to the police. Some reports describe that police even assaulted some of the lesbians in the crowd, touching them in a lurid manner while frisking them. A crowd slowly began to form outside the bar. Eventually, the employees of the bar were taken outside and driven away by the police, but as the police attempted to arrest patrons, violence broke out; an officer had attempted to pick up a woman and throw her into police transportation. What followed was hours of violence and resistance - police action and response by the crowd. The next evening the events continued, this time with multiple NYPD precincts involved and around 1,000 supporters fighting in the streets.

This was one of the first and most public demonstrations of Queer people fighting for their right to exist. The first Pride march took place on the anniversary of the Stonewall Riot on Christopher Street in New York City. It should be noted, however, that simultaneous marches took place in Los Angeles and Chicago, and the year after the marches spread even further in

the United States and internationally (London, England; Paris, France; West Berlin, Germany; Stockholm, Sweden).

Pride is a memorial and Pride is a commemoration of the actions of individuals who would no longer stand for unjust treatment at the hands of authority. But Pride isn't just that; during the height of the AIDS epidemic (circa 1985 CE, 142 BE), Pride was also the center of organizing an international effort to recognize and memorialize the dead whom governments largely ignored. These efforts even crossed over into Bahá'í initiatives; one of the major reasons for the founding of BNASAA (Bahá'í Network on Aids, Sexuality, and Addiction) was as support for families and Queer people who lost their loved ones in that tumultuous time.

In modern times, Pride has evolved to fill multiple niches. Yes, the parades and marches still take place every year in June (or throughout the summer months of the Northern Hemisphere), but in almost every region where there are Pride events, there are also commemorative and educational events for entire families. Queer communities, especially those with newfound ability to officially raise children, have always found ways to pass on their history to the next generation, to commemorate those involved in the struggle, and memorialize those lost along the way.

As Bahá'ís, our way of celebrating Holy Days is no different. We gather, we tell stories, we study the Dawn-Breakers, and we relate the travels and travails of the heroes of the Faith. We often do it on Holy Days and during festivals. One might even say that for a worldwide community largely ostracized from religious and spiritual refuge, Pride is a holy festival.

Persecuted communities worldwide memorialize, commemorate, and celebrate key moments in their history of persecution, resistance, education, and acceptance as they undergo their "emergence from obscurity." Though often disregarded owing to their still contested status in society, the Queer community is no different. In fact, there are many parallels to the development of Bahá'í traditions and festivals that follow a similar arc. In whatever form it is manifested, the heroic struggle that makes Bahá'í history so rich should also allow Bahá'ís to empathize and connect with other minority groups, including the Queer community. We must see the social forces in operation rather than limit our understanding to the scandal that often accompanies the struggle for social inclusion.

In closing, a quotation directly related to the history of the growth and publicity of the Bahá'í Faith is left to the reader to draw parallels.

An excerpt from a letter from the Universal House of Justice addressed to the Followers of Bahá'u'lláh in the United States of America dated 29 December 1988 CE (18 Masá'il 145 BE):

The Faith is as yet in its infancy. Despite its emergence from obscurity, even now the vast majority of the human race remains ignorant of its existence; moreover, the vast majority of its adherents are relatively new Bahá'ís. The change implied by this new stage in its evolution is that whereas heretofore this tender plant was protected in its obscurity from the attention of external elements, it has now become exposed. This exposure invites close observation, and that observation will eventually lead to opposition in various quarters. So, far from adopting a carefree attitude, the community must be conscious of the necessity to present a correct view of itself and an accurate understanding of its purpose to a largely skeptical public. A greater effort, a greater care must now be

exercised to ensure its protection against the malice of the ignorant and the unwisdom of its friends.

Reference

Universal House of Justice. Universal House of Justice to the Followers of Bahá'u'lláh in the United States of America, Haifa, Israel, December 29, 1988.

www.bahai.org/library/authoritative-texts/the-universal-house-of-justice/messages/19881229_001/1#986857639