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Hindu Festivals and the Christian Calendar

R. D. IMMANUEL

(A paper read at the Conference on Christian Worship held at Matheran in April, 1957.)

The average Hindu feels at home in the atmosphere of festivities; feasts and festivals enable him to give his religious experience a social expression. In other words popular Hindu religion has a large element of social thinking and social feeling, and feasts and festivals are only concrete expressions of this feature of Hinduism. The Indian Christian has the same cultural background, unless he has been made to forgo it by urban or foreign influences. But since most of our Christians live in rural surroundings, the question of our attitude towards Hindu festivals is a matter for serious study and consideration. The principles underlying these festivals must be made clear if we are to make any progress at all.

THE THEOLOGY OF HINDU FESTIVALS

When a particular day is set apart as sacred, it means that certain moments or periods of time can become instruments of deeper or richer religious experience by association with events of religious importance or with the lives of spiritual leaders. If this were the only principle there would be nothing against adapting and incorporating Hindu festivals into our calendar. But along with this is a deeper and non-Christian idea, namely pantheism, according to which there is not an object in heaven or on earth or underneath the earth which the Hindu is not prepared to worship. This is a rather serious matter for the Christian, since one of the cardinal doctrines of our faith is that there is an eternal difference between the Creator and the creature and that worship, honour and glory belong to God alone. The modern Hindu can easily explain away the crudity of some of these facts philosophically, but the impression on the rural Christian will not be anything less than gross idolatry. So the greatest care must be taken to see that any festival that has in it any trace of worship of anyone other than the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ is to be rejected utterly and uncompromisingly.

When we study the evolution of festivals we find that some are magical in character, or at the best originated in nature or vegetation myths. During centuries of evolution they have been transformed and in many cases new ceremonies have been grafted on to old. There is nothing new in this for the Church. In the past the Church has taken non-Christian festivals and baptized them with Christian names, given them Christian meanings and included them in the Christian calendar.

In the festivals connected with sowing and reaping there are quite a number of magical elements. But agricultural festivals should not be discarded just because some elements in them are unworthy. Religion should pervade every aspect of life and consecrate it for the glory of God. If the Church does not care to exercise this important function of religion, secularism and materialism will invade. So the better way will be to take over the agricultural cults, purge them of all unworthy elements, and give them good Christian concepts. Instead of the unwholesome myths, the Christian doctrine of God as the supreme giver of life, and man as the steward responsible to his Maker for all that he possesses should be taught. - From the point of view of theology this is one of the most important features of festivals. Feasts and festivals enable religion to pervade every aspect (secular, social or private) of human life. Church History and Theology can be taught in a very elementary but nevertheless unforgettable way by the wholesome use of festivals directed and controlled by the Church.

THE PSYCHOLOGY OF HINDU FESTIVALS

Our Master compared His religion to a wedding feast, and so showed that there is no greater merit in that type of asceticism which makes suppression of the flesh an end in itself. Most of the festivals in Hinduism are occasions for joy. Any institution that helps people to be cheerful and happy has a rightful place in our religion. It is very right and proper that our days of joy and merriment should be consecrated to God and integrated with religion. Such are festivals like *Divāli* and the *Pongal*. But there are other festivals which are connected with regulating or controlling the natural appetites of man. The popular faith of Hinduism is that piety and devotion are strengthened by fastings, vigils, worship and ablutions. It also recommends gifts to holy persons, practice of austerities and physical hardships for the benefit of the spirit within. So we find that there are a number of festivals that recommend these. For instance, fasting is the rule during *Vaikuntha Ekādasi*; people are enjoined to keep a vigil throughout the night of *Sivātri*. The principles underlying such festivals deserve our consideration and careful study. The Roman Catholic Church advocates fastings and vigils and according to certain texts, our Lord made the statement 'this kind (of demons) can come forth by nothing but by prayer and fasting'.

A large number of Protestants have given up the practice of vigils and fastings because when they are enforced in a mechanical way (as they would be if a date is fixed on the calendar and everyone everywhere is asked to fast) they become somewhat formal. So also is alms-giving. Our Master told us definitely: 'Take heed that ye do not your alms before men, to be seen of them: otherwise ye have no reward of your Father who is in heaven'. However, since the cultural background is helpful, the Church leaders, with great caution, may reinforce the practice of vigils, fastings and alms-giving.

So fasting, vigil and alms-giving on certain days especially set apart by the Church have to be considered as aids to worship. As Evelyn Underhill points out:

'It is surely mere arrogance to insist that with angels and archangels we laud and magnify the Holy Name, whilst disdain the shaggy companions who come with us to the altar of faith: having already, indeed, discerned that altar in a darkness which we have left behind, and given costly offerings to the unknown God, whom we coldly serve. The primitive, sensitive to the mysterious quality of life, worshipping by gift and gesture, and devising ritual patterns whereby all the faculties of his nature and all the members of his group can be united in common action towards God, still remains a better model for human worship than the speculative philosopher, or the solitary quietist, for he accepts his situation humbly instead of trying to retreat from it' (*Worship*, p. 21). Whether we like it or not, we are body and mind: only when our body is given a chance to participate in such things as vigils and fasts, will our worship experience be complete.

THE SOCIAL ASPECT OF FESTIVALS

Religion is an ambivalent affair. It is an individual as well as a social phenomenon. In the past centuries, the Protestant churches as a whole, and in a general way, emphasized the individual aspect of religion. It is only recently that more and more emphasis is being laid on the social nature of religion. Feasts, festivals and fairs form a part of the indigenous technique to produce a corporate religious experience in the community. Social experience of religion is a natural and innate craving put in the heart of man by his Creator and feasts and festivals provide a congenial atmosphere for such a social expression. Let us take as an instance the car festival at Puri in Orissa. A hundred thousand or more pilgrims flock to this small town. Every year three *Rathas* or cars are constructed anew for the three deities. The one draped in blue cloth is for Jaganāth, the one in red for Subhadrā and the one in white for Balarāman. Each one is adorned with flags, floral wreaths and festoons. They are dragged over the broad path with thick ropes by pilgrims of both sexes and of all stations in life. The Raja of Puri sweeps the road before the car. A replica of the same can be seen at

Rāmeśwaram, Madurai, Conjeevaram, Tirunelveli, etc. Here is an example of a social expression of religion which can be a matter of careful study. Whether we like it or not, social phenomena condition individual feelings and emotions. So if we have projects to work out (as for instance evangelism) it is much easier to accomplish it by organizing it around a yearly festival. Of course, there are very grave disadvantages. First and foremost these outbursts of activity are not steady. Secondly, they are not based upon reason. Thirdly, there are likely to be reactions. In spite of all these shortcomings, the Church leaders as wise stewards ought to devise means and ways of making use of feasts and festivals by incorporating them in the Christian calendar. Thus it is much easier to participate in evangelistic work when everyone is doing it on a specific day. Similarly it is much easier to fast or go to Church or sing when the whole community does so; when many participate in religious festivals emotions that lie dormant in the heart are naturally roused and one member helps every other member.

In dealing with the social aspect of religion due consideration should be given to festivals like *Ashtabhandan* and *Aranya Shashthi*, and *Vijaya Dasmi*. *Ashtabhandan* is a social institution that is intended to promote the growth of genuine love and affection between brothers and sisters. *Vijaya Dasmi* is the tenth day of the waxing moon of October and the purpose of its rituals is to promote reunion, and reconciliation, obeisance to superiors, love and embrace to equals, and blessings to juniors. If there are quarrels they are made up on this day. *Aranya Shashthi* might be called the picnic festival. On this day women go in parties outside the village to a banyan tree in the neighbouring jungle and hold a sort of picnic as a part of the function. The sons-in-law are invited and entertained with food and new clothes.

Such indigenous festivals that emphasize healthy social relationships deserve to be considered for adaptation and inclusion in the Christian calendar.

THE ECONOMIC ASPECT OF FESTIVALS

Communism's one-sided emphasis on the economic and material aspect of life is a great danger to the Church. However, communism has taught the Church a lesson that she forgot to learn from our Master. He fed the five thousand and told His disciples: 'give ye them to eat'. In these days when labour and capital are tending to divide into two great camps of mutual enmity, the Church should take advantage of opportunities to bring about a reconciliation between labour and capital. One of these ways is to organize festivals to reconcile the parties. The sacredness of labour, man's stewardship of the soil, God's mercy and grace and His wonderful providence to man, all these and a score of other important doctrines are emphasized in the agricultural festivals. The trouble about them is that they are full of magic and unedifying myths and legends.

The following are some important festivals of this kind :—

1. *Akshayya Trīṭiyā*. This occurs in the month of *Vaiśākha* or May-June. Tradesmen begin their year this day especially when they want to start a new venture. As an advertisement, they give sweets and seasonal fruits as presents to customers.

2. *Ayutha Puja*. All those who work with tools set them apart and offer worship to their patron deity *Viśvakarmā*. It is the artisan's holiday. Women too do not cook on this day ; fried rice and confectionery are substituted for meals.

3. *Pongal*, especially *Māttu Pongal*, is an agricultural festival. The boiling of milk and sugared rice is only a magical way of insuring plenty and prosperity.

Agricultural and labour festivals have great religious value because they help religion to invade every sphere of human activity. They help us to see that earth is crammed with haven, and that trust in God our Creator and faith in His providence is a fundamental necessity for our very living. The joy of reaping the harvest should be linked to a religious festival and be transformed into a joyous thankoffering festival, as is done now in many churches.

THE HINDU CALENDAR

The Hindu calendar was adjusted to the ancient Hindu way of life—a life of agriculture. The weather was another factor that was taken into consideration. But in modern days when we have air-conditioned third class coaches in railway trains, we cannot and need not follow the Hindu calendar strictly. However, the principles should be studied and all non-Christian factors should be eschewed. All Hindu festivals are movable because they depend upon the apparent journey of the sun, the star constellations, the phases of the moon and its relative position to other bodies. On account of a pantheistic theology, the sun, moon, and stars are objects of worship for Hindus. So they are given primary importance. In the Christian calendar, such can never be the case. But at certain seasons the Indian farmer is extremely busy, while at other seasons he has little or nothing to do. If the Church does not fill the idle moments of the farmer the devil has plenty of means and ways to fill them. Evangelistic campaigns, membership crusades, financial appeals that require long and steady work, should be fixed at this time. Generally speaking our policy should be to gear consistently the Christian festivals into the recurring changes of weather, occupation, and the energy as well as the leisure of the population.

ALTERNATIVES BEFORE THE CHURCH

Such in brief are some of the features of Hindu festivals. What is the Church to do with them ? Three alternatives at least lie before us :—

1. To exclude completely any trace of Hinduism in festivals.
2. To take some festivals of the Church from the West and observe them in ways which are typically Indian.
3. To take some Hindu festivals, purge them of non-Christian elements, and give them Christian meaning and content.

Let us examine each of these. 'To exclude completely any trace of Hindu culture.' This has been more or less the policy of the early Church leaders. In their anxiety to be uncompromisingly pure in their doctrine and Christian conduct they took a very hostile attitude and there is much to be said in their favour. However, from the point of religious experience the Indian Christian, who has not some festival or other like the Hindu, is deprived of something which is his birthright. Indian Davids can slay much better the Goliaths of irreligion when they are equipped with slings and smooth stones taken from the brook, than when they are clad in the foreign armour of Saul. Indian Christianity will be expressed best when the Hindu culture is purged of its non-Christian elements and given Christian content. This would mean inventing new festivals which would suit the temperament of the people, and their practices. The following are some of the usual features of Hindu festivals:— processions; singing bands; ablutions; community gatherings; corporate undertakings for some special causes; pilgrimages; melas; conventions; vigils; fasts; continuous reading aloud of the Scriptures; offerings at a shrine; use of flowers in a special way; use of *kathas* or *kaletchepams*.

However, a note of caution must be sounded. Our Master's religion is a universal religion. It exalts above national needs the claims of the brotherhood of all nationalities. So if India is not to become a dead branch in the growing tree of the World Christian Church, it should not give up its connection with the World Church. That is why we cannot change the date of Easter or Christmas. There must be something that is common in the observance of at least the most important festivals throughout the world. So if we are to invent and introduce new festivals our aim should be only to enrich our religious experience.

The months of May and June are specially suitable for gatherings at night in the open air in most parts of India. If the Church is to introduce new festivals at that time most of the elements mentioned above could be integrated into those festivals.

The second alternative is to take some festivals of the Church and observe them in typically Indian ways. For instance we can observe feasts and hold vigils (as is done often by the Roman Catholics) during the season of Lent. One or more of the twelve practices mentioned can be easily inserted in any of our great festivals, viz. Christmas, Good Friday, Easter Day and Whit

Sunday. Care of course must be taken to see that the camel of cultural practice does not enter into the tent and drive away the master, i.e. the spirit of religion, from the tent.

The third alternative is to take some Hindu festivals, purge them of non-Christian elements and give them Christian meaning or content. If this method is adopted, the present Christian calendar will remain as it is, and the Indian Church will follow with the rest of the world the regular Christian calendar but, in addition to it, it will observe a few Hindu festivals after purifying and transforming them. Here we are on delicate ground and the utmost caution should be observed. For instance *Diwāli* might be transformed into the festival of Christ the Light of the world ; suitable collects might be written and appropriate candle lighting rituals might be inserted. A Church service where this ritual takes place, with an appropriate sermon, will be an enrichment of our Christian experience. Besides this we might have processions, singing bands, *katha*, etc.

Ayutha Puja is another festival that is pregnant with possibilities. The Hindu worships his tools. But the Church can use this as an occasion for teaching the sacredness of work and for consecrating tools as well as hands and heart to the honour and glory of God. The importance lies in teaching that man receives from God everything he has, his tools as well as his skill. Special services have to be worked out for this.

Pongal is another festival which can be transformed into a festival of first fruits. That is exactly what Hindus are doing. But while they worship the sun, we bow down with reverence and heartily thank our God from whom all blessings flow.

These three alternatives need not be hard and fast watertight compartments. Through the ages, slowly but surely cultural practices are bound to get through the process of spiritual osmosis. But it is the task of our leaders to see that the true religion of our Master is not diluted or compromised.

We live in India. Our background is predominantly Hindu. This environment we cannot eradicate, but we can change it ; we cannot eradicate the pantheistic and non-Christian influences of our culture, but we can bring them under the orbit of the Church and make our weaknesses, by His grace, a means of grace for the glory of His holy name.