

Indian Festivals and Christian Celebrations—5

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PART III : FESTIVALS(1)

2. ONAM*

Onam is the most important national festival of Kerala; the lush land of 'kera' (coconut trees), mountains, rivers and backwaters. Onam falls in the solar month called *Chingam* (*sinham*: Leo) with which the Malayalam year begins. Obviously it is the harvest festival of Kerala, *Chingam* being the month of harvest. Several references to this festival are seen in the ancient literature and inscriptions. Many scholars hold that the festival of Onam originates from Thrikkakara in central Kerala where there is a temple dedicated to Vamana, the avatar of Vishnu. This deity is widely known in Kerala as *Thrikkakara-Appan* whose statue or symbol is installed in front of every Hindu house celebrating Onam. It is said that Onam was already celebrated in Trikkakara on a grand scale in the age of the Kulashekaras of Mahodayapuram (800-1102 A.D.).⁽²⁾

The celebrated writer Bartholomeo in his travelogue, *A voyage to the East Indies*, describes how Onam was celebrated in Kerala in the 18th century⁽³⁾ Recently, from 1961 onwards, the Kerala government has taken great interest in the celebration of this ancient festival. As part of this celebration, subsidized by the government, various cultural items ancient and modern, are performed in different towns of the state during the festival days.

* This year Tiruvonam falls on August 26.

(1) See *WW* XXI (1988), 178-187 (May-June).

(2) A. Sridhara Menon, *Cultural heritage of Kerala, an Introduction*, Cochin, 1978, p. 65.

(3) *Ibid.*

The myths remembered

Though the deity of Trikkakara is Vamana, the avatar of Vishnu, what the people of Kerala particularly and lovingly remember during these festival days is the prosperous reign of an Asura king called Mahabali. Mythology relates that Mahabali was the grandson of Prahlada, the son of Hiranyakasipu who was an Asura king and an enemy of Devas.⁽⁴⁾ Prahlada, though born in the Asura dynasty, was a devotee of Vishnu. About Mahabali no such reference of his devotion to Vishnu is made in the ancient *puranas*. However Mahabali was a righteous king, greatly loved by his people.

The *Vamana-Purana* gives the following description of the victorious reign of King Mahabali.

Bali was a virtuous king who ruled according to Dharma. Goddess Lakshmi was pleased with him and came to reside in his kingdom. Along with Lakshmi came other goddesses and Divine Graces such as Modesty (*Hri*), Glory (*Kirti*), Lustre (*Dyuli*), Radiance (*Prabha*), Firmness of Will (*Dhriti*), Forgiveness (*Kshama*), Power (*Sakti*), Prosperity (*Riddhi*), Intelligence (*Mahamati*), Learning (*Sruti*), Knowledge (*Vidya*), Memory (*Smiti*), Equanimity (*Santi*), Growth (*Pushti*), Action (*Kriya*) (Vn. 23. 19-20). Thus Bali who is here called a Brahma-vadin became the master of the three worlds.⁽⁵⁾

Though the *Vamana-Purana* was written as a eulogy to Vishnu and Devas, it sincerely acknowledges the good qualities of Bali, the Asura king. The power, prestige and popularity of Bali were seen by the Devas with jealousy. Therefore, headed by Indra, they approached the divine mother Aditi who was performing *tapas* on mount Meru. Following the suggestion of Aditi they went to Vishnu and pleaded him to be born as the

(4) *Vamana Purana* — a study, Varanasi, Prithivi Prakashana, 1983, p. 66.

(5) *Vamana Purana*, 23. 19-20.

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son of Aditi and thus put a stop to the reign of the great king Mahabali. Vishnu agreed and took birth as Vamana (dwarf) and resided in Kurukshetra.

Once, when the king Mahabali was performing a *yajna*, Vamana approached him as a young Brahmin boy (dwarf) and begged three foot-measures of land for his chamber of sacrifice (*agnisala*). Though his guru Sukramuni warned him not to have any dealings with the boy, Mahabali considered to bestow gifts on people as really befitting a great king. Hence Bali gladly agreed to the request of Vamana, little knowing what the consequences would be. Suddenly Vamana, who was Mahavisnu himself in disguise, assumed a gigantic form (*virat-rupa*) which filled the whole universe. With two steps he covered the regions of heaven and earth and demanded a place for the third step. Though Mahabali's own son Banasura vehemently protested against this deceit, Mahabali, being faithful to his promise, offered his head as a foot-place for the step. Vamana placed his foot upon the King's head and pushed him down into the infernal world or patala. According to *Vamana-purana* the triumphant Vamana ordered a festival to be conducted in the underworld with the offerings of lamps (*dipa-pradana*) and flowers.⁽⁶⁾ According to the tradition in Kerala Mahabali was allowed to visit his dear people once every year in the month of *Chingam*. *Thiruvonam* is the auspicious day of the home-coming of Mahabali.

The rituals and celebrations

The celebrations of the Onam festival formally start on the day of *attam*, ten days before the great day of holy Onam (*tiru-onam*). The nine days (*novena*) are spent in solemn preparations for the coming of the great king Mahabali. People make floral decorations in front of their houses heralding their readiness to welcome their beloved king. Some consider this also as a welcome accorded to Vamana, who was an *avatar* of Visnu. The most important days of the Onam festival are the

(6) *Vamana-purana*, 92. 56-58.

utradam and *tiruvonam* which are also known as the first and second onam respectively. There are two more days following, popularly known as third and fourth onam. From the day of first onam onwards a statue or a symbol of the deity of Trikkakara (*Trikkakara-appan*) is installed in front of many Hindu houses. Thus a reference to Vamana is also made. On the day of *tiruvonam* a grand feast is held in every family in Kerala.

Socio-cultural significance of the festival

Onam is also a social festival of great jubilation. Various kinds of games are organized for men and women all over the state of Kerala. Some of the most popular games among the menfolk are *thalapanthu* which resembles to a certain extent the foot-ball games of our times, *onathallu* which is a kind of wrestling or combat conducted by two groups belonging to two different regions. There are other games such as *karadi-kali* or *puli-kali* in which young people dress themselves like a bear (*karadi*) or tiger (*puli*) and go from house to house accompanied by a group of singers. The women folk of a locality gather in one or other house and engage themselves in various kinds of group dances popularly known as *tiruvatira-kali*, *kaikotti-kali* (dance with the clapping of hands) etc.

Onam is also a day of giving and receiving presents. The father of the house gives presents to all the members of his family. The tenants of rich land-lords bring gifts of Onam (*ona-kashcha*) to their landlord which are usually fruits and other items from their field. The landlords in their turn have to give the tenants presents in return which usually consist in clothes (*ona-pudaya*), rice and other articles necessary for life. The idea is that everybody should be happy as they remember the visit of their good king Mahabali. People sing the Onam song about the reign of Maveli (Mahabali) which could be translated as follows :

When Maveli rules over the land
 All people form an equal band
 And as they live in joy and calm
 Everyone is free from harm
 There is no theft and no deceit
 And no one speaks an untruth yet
 Weights and measures are all correct
 No one tries to cheat or corrupt
 When Maveli rules over the land
 All people form an equal band.

Historically it is very improbable that Maveli, the grandson of Prahlada, was the king in Kerala, because according to *Vamana-purana* the story takes place in the vicinities of Kurukshetra which is in the North. However, it is true that Dravidians were reigning in South India and that later Aryans migrated to the South and had a period of supremacy over the Dravidians. *Vamana-purana* may be a tribute to the triumph of the Aryans in the South. Written by an Aryan Brahmin, *devas* represent the Aryans and *asuras* the Dravidians. *Purana* is likely to be the mythologization of this nucleus event. The defeat of the Asura king is the defeat of the Dravidians who were very powerful in South India. In spite of the tragic defeat by Vamana, the *avatar* of Visnu, the people of Kerala lovingly remember their beloved king and sing his glories as he visits them every year on the day of Onam, hoping that one day they will again have a similar reign of justice, peace and equality.

Christian Reflection : A Festival of Eschatological Remembrance.

Anamnesis, remembrance, is a word charged with meaning in a Christian lexicon. The paschal mystery is celebrated as a remembrance of what the Lord did. "Do this in memory of me" (Lk 22:19). But this remembrance is not simply a remembrance of a past event. Of course, the Christ-event is remembered. It is an ongoing remembrance until his second coming when

what is being remembered will be brought to fulfilment. This final goal is the *eschaton* (end) towards which our salvation history moves. Every year, every day we remember this eschatological coming of the Lord. The liturgical prayers of the oriental Churches make time and again reference of this final coming of the Lord.

Seen from this perspective, Christian life is a life of eschatological remembrance, a memory of the future. Because it is a memory it has reference to the past. But it is a memory of an event which in an on-going process is continued in and through our lives. The celebration of Onam could be seen as a happy remembrance of the Kingdom that the Lord, our Saviour, has established in this world and of the promise of its fulfilment in the Kingdom of heaven. The Lord keeps coming to us every year to lead us to this fulfilment. Bali, though just and good, has a tragic end. Christ also had a tragic end with regard to his earthly span of life. But this earthly defeat of their Lord does not make Christians a people of despair. On the contrary, when the Father raised Jesus of Nazareth, crucified for our salvation, from the dead, the last and strongest enemy was defeated and a radically new future had begun. Hence we may hope with certainty for the second coming of Christ, the eschatological finale of the whole history of all humankind. Though Bali was defeated, the people of Kerala judged that he will come again to visit them. The dynamic of hope, at work in the depth of human consciousness, is essentially the same. Of course, the Christian faith in the Christ-event adds a radically new dimension of certainty to the eschatological future. Hence it is proper that Christians join in the celebration of Onam as a remembrance of this second coming of Christ, who keeps coming and visiting them through his Spirit every day. One day of the year they remember it in a great festive mood. They make floral decorations and illumine their houses with lamps because on this day they welcome their Lord in a special way. In fact in Kerala Christians also celebrate Onam. Though at the synod of Diamper, held in 1599, Archbishop Menesis condemned Onam as a Hindu

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festival and warned Christians in Kerala to abstain from the celebrations, they did not yield to his order which expressed a negative attitude to the culture of the people. They had a different logic which is now being proved to be ever more true and authentic.

AN ESCHATOLOGICAL MEDITATION FOR THE DAY OF ONAM

Sit relaxed, focussing your attention on the second coming of Jesus. He comes to fulfil the promise of the kingdom of heaven which has already been established on earth. Onam reminds us of this eschatological coming of the Lord, as the people of Kerala celebrate the annual visit of Maveli, the king of prosperity, who reigned over them in mythological times, and is expected to come again and again to restore his kingdom of peace, prosperity and plenitude. In spite of the promise of our Lord Jesus Christ, we are now actually in a situation of distorted existence, struggling to realize the kingdom that is in us. Let us look at Onam as an anticipated memory of this realized situation which our Lord has promised to fulfil.

Sit relaxed. Try to visualise the coming of the Lord.
 He comes to destroy and to fulfil;
 He comes to take us to his abode;
 He comes to fill our hearts with his joy and peace;
 Listen to his footsteps.

Reading : Gitanjali XLV

Have you not heard his silent steps? He comes
 comes, ever comes.

Every moment and every age, every day and every
 night he comes, comes, ever comes.

Many a song have I sung in many a mood of mind,
 but all their notes have always proclaimed, 'He
 comes, comes, ever comes.'

In the fragrant days of sunny April through the forest path he comes, comes, ever comes.

In the rainy gloom of July nights on the thundering chariot of clouds he comes, comes, ever comes.

In sorrow after sorrow it is his steps that press upon my heart, and it is the golden touch of his feet that makes my joy to shine.

Silence

An appropriate bhajan to the risen Lord who comes to fulfill his promises.

(The following bhajan is a description of his coming as presented in the Book of Revelation :)

*Svetasva-vahanam
rakta-sikta-vasasam isvaram
divya-vak-abhidham vande
raja-rajam prabhu-prabhum*

Clad in the dress-drenched with blood (he comes)
riding on his horse gleaming white
The Word Divine is his name
King of kings Lord of Lords.

Or any other bhajan with the words *jiva-data*, *mukti-data* and *santi-data*.

Keep singing the bhajan in your heart. Sink deep into its meaning. . . If you feel comfortable, enter into your breathing rhythm. Now you breathe in the hope of fulfilment which Jesus promises to you. . . breathe out all anxieties and worries from your life. Be filled with the peace of the Lord. Breathing. . . silence. . . peace.

The Lord will certainly fulfil his promises. Let us now see before us the great moment of the eschatological fulfilment.

Reading : Mt 25 : 31-40 (the scene of the last judgement)

Let us reflect on the final fulfilment.
 Final fulfilment is according to what we perform,
 and not according to our claim of belonging.
 Final fulfilment is measured
 in the light of our love for our neighbour.
 Here is presented an ideal of the kingdom to come
 in the light of which we have to live here.
 See how this ideal has been worked out in our lives.
 The kingdom is now being established
 in and through each one of us.
 Silence. . . breathing. . . peace.

We conclude the meditation surrendering ourselves totally
 for the fulfilment of the Lord's promises in us as we await the
 second coming of the Lord.

A final bhajan to the risen Lord.

OUTLINE OF A PRAYER SERVICE FOR ONAM

Since Onam is for us a feast of eschatological remembrance
 of our Lord's second coming, let us begin this prayer service
 with a bhajan expressing our hope in the Lord.

1. Bhajan

Saranam, saranam, sara-	You are my hope, my
nam, saranam.	refuge
Preethi Swarupane sara-	O! Love embodied, you are
nam	my hope
Divya Jyothiye saranam	O! Heavenly light, you are
Karuna Murthiya saranam	my hope
Saranam, saranam, sara-	O! Embodiment of Mercy,
nam, saranam	you are my hope
Jeeva dathane saranam	O! Giver of life, you are my
Divya Tejane saranam	hope
Shanti dathane saranam	O! Divine Flame, you are my
Saranam, saranam, sara-	hope
nam, saranam.	O! Giver of Peace, you are
	my hope

2. An appropriate *introduction* explaining the meaning of Onam and its relation to the second coming of Jesus.

3. Reading I

Commentary :

Onam, though associated with a myth, is also a harvest festival. In the kingdom of God what we have to remember is that all our fellow-beings are children of God and all should attain happiness. The first reading is therefore taken from an ancient Buddhist writing which gives us directives on how to live amicably and joyfully with our sisters and brothers.

Reader :

He who for the sake of happiness hurts others who also want happiness, shall not hereafter find happiness.

He who for the sake of happiness does not hurt others who also want happiness, shall hereafter find happiness.

Never speak harsh words, for once spoken they may return to you. Angry words are painful and there may be blows for blows.

Those who make channels for water control the waters; makers of arrows make the arrows straight; carpenters control their timber; and the holy control their soul.

(*Dhammapada* 10. 131–133, 145)

4. Reflection. *Silence*

5. Let us respond to this reflection by another ancient Buddhist *prayer* for the welfare of the whole creation taken from *Sutta-nipata*. We recite it as a Psalm.

Your response : May all be happy and safe !
May all beings gain inner joy !

All : May all be happy and safe !
May all beings gain inner joy !

Leader : All living beings whatever
 Without exception, weak or strong,
 Whether long or high
 Middling or small, subtle or gross,
 Seen or unseen
 Dwelling afar or near
 Born or yet unborn
 May all beings gain inner joy !

All : May all be happy and safe !
 May all beings gain inner joy !

Leader : May no being deceive another,
 Nor in any way scorn another,
 Nor, in anger or ill-will,
 Desire another's sorrow.

All : May all be happy and safe !
 May all beings gain inner joy !

Leader : As a mother cares for her son,
 Her only son, all her days,
 So towards all things living
 A man's mind should be all-embracing
 Friendliness for the whole world,
 All embracing, he should raise in his mind,
 Above, below, and across,
 Unhindered, free from hate and ill-will.

All : May all be happy and safe !
 May all beings gain inner joy !

6. Silence

7. Reading II

Commentary :

The Son of Man has already come to establish his kingdom and we hope he will come again. Already half a century before the arrival of Christ, when the *Vamana-purana* was

probably composed, the prophet Isaiah had given us a beautiful description of the kingdom to come. Let us now listen to these words as the people around us remember the coming of the mythical king Mahabali and his kingdom.

Reader : A reading from the prophet Isaiah 11:1-9

8. **Response** : another bhajan of *Saranam*
or
sing Psalm 33

9. **Reading III**

Commentary :

The Book of Revelation gives us the following details of the final fulfilment of the kingdom. Our life is a life in hope, we are yearning for its realization. That day God himself will be our King and we will be his dear people.

Reader : A reading from the Book of Revelation 21:1-5

10. **Reflection. Silence**

11. **Final Bhajan** : or hymn praising the Lord of all seasons; the Lord who brings everything to fulfilment.

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fulfil the mission the Lord has given us; accordingly it is highly recommended to choose one in accordance with the theme of the celebration and/or the character of the feast or season.

The classification in, for example, 'With Joyful Lips' is generally a helpful guide. It is easier to indicate what is clearly inappropriate at a particular moment of the Eucharistic celebration than to give a full-proof classification.