

RELIGIOUS FESTIVALS CONVERGENT AND DIVERGENT FACTORS

V. F. Vineeth*

1. Introduction

From the very ancient days the humans look up to heaven to fix up the dates of religious festivals. The human beings have a cosmic nature. To their cosmos belong all the planets, the earth on which they live, the space, the air, the trees and, finally, all the planets in the sky. But one planet was considered special as far as the time of religious festivals was concerned. This was the moon, the lovely daughter of heaven. The psalmist says: "Thou has made the moon to mark the seasons of festivals" (Psalm 104:19). The moon with her waning and waxing dynamics invited mankind to count time, fix up dates, months and, finally, dates for festivals. In India and Israel almost all religious festivals are fixed up based on the lunar movement.

The cosmic and the divine meet in the human individual. "Then the Lord God formed man of dust from the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living being" (Gen 2:7). What came from the earth belongs to the earth; hence, the human being is very much earth-bound. But what came from heaven is divine. As a unit arising from the union of the cosmic and the divine the earthly and the heavenly, body and soul, the human being has the tremendous potential to bring down heaven to the earth and, in the same way, to raise up the earth to the world of the divine, the far transcendent world where God dwells. Certain highlighted moments of this union are deemed to be very central and have been remembered in a special way. On these auspicious

*Prof. V. F. Vineeth, a long time professor of philosophy and comparative religion at Dharmaram Vidya Kshetram, Bangalore, and an author well-known for his penetrating and insightful works in Indian Christian spirituality, is the founder-director of Vidyavanam Ashram, Bangalore, an Indian-Christian initiative of blending search, research and realization, giving room for the philosophical and theological, secular and religious, knowledge of scientific advancements and the silence of the woods, academic research and spiritual *sadhana*.

occasions the heavenly and earthly meet in a more intense manner and invite the humans to participate in this union of the cosmic and the divine. Thus, we get a festival day or a season of festive celebrations. These are called religious days of festivals, because what is remembered is an event or an effect of a salvation history, in which the divine and the human have met and this meeting has become part and parcel of our religious memory.

2. The Temporal and the Eternal in Religious Festivals

The human beings live in time and are bound by time. Temporality is an inner dimension of his self-realization on earth. Time somehow domesticates him into each mode of being, namely into a becoming process. All his decisions are made in time and executed in the 'duration' of what we call time. Time is a becoming process. To be temporal means to be part and parcel of this becoming process. Temporality, that is, to be in time, is a predicament of all embodied beings. This predicament means that an embodied being is in a process of continued struggle, realizing at the expense of its own time-bound energy, which in return means that this particular being is moving to its own death or disintegration day by day. Among all embodied beings, the human being alone looks at this phenomenon with a will to transcend the above-mentioned predicamental situation. This is because among all the embodied beings, in the human being along there is a heaven-bound consciousness, well preserved in the fragile framework of the body. By the power of this consciousness the human being tries to overcome 'death', that is, to attain the victory of the 'temporal' 'over its own being. This taste for transcendence over the human and the temporal is best expressed at the time of religious festivals. Recalling to mind the sacred events that took place in a "mythical time" or in recent history, as in Christianity, the humans make a bridge from the temporal to the eternal, from this predicament of mortality to the bliss of immortality. Time and eternity meet in the memorial of events celebrated.

Memory is a thing of the past. But it is not just a past event. This will be history. But in memory a historical event is brought to the present life of the people with a view that they be transformed in the light of that event. "Do this in memory of me" (Lk 22:19). When Jesus said this he was not asking us just to go back to a historical event as if to teach us history. Rather he was asking us to remember a historical fact that may inspire us, enliven us anew and lay the foundation for a new life in the future. Here past and future merge in the present moment of history and

become a powerful auspicious moment filling us with the inspiring meaning of the past, awakening us for a sacrificial life for others in the model of Jesus' self-sacrificing death on the cross. The human being is temporal by nature but time is not just three phases in our history, but deep down is a moment of our historical existence into which is woven our whole past and future. In this sense every moment is *ec-static*, standing out of the present moment, though totally held in the present, in its orientation to the past and the future. In this sense the festal celebration is a remembrance, a memorial, but not a remembrance of something like a lifeless mathematical formula, but the memorial of an inspiring event which inspires me here and now, challenges me and accompanies me in such a way that my future life becomes completely surrendered to and transformed by that event. "*Tat arpitham akhila acharata*" ("surrendered to that is the entire life-style of a devotee"), says the *Bhakti-sutra*, an ancient classical work on *Bhakti*. The devotee of the Lord remembers the life of the Lord. Every step or event is lovingly remembered. This loving and living memory becomes an eternal source of inspiration. Remembrance becomes a continued meditation. "What you meditate that you become," is an ancient Indian dictum. Remembrance is, therefore, a living memory, by which one slowly gets transformed into what is remembered. "Do this in memory of me" has this type of a memorial command. It is a living memory as a springboard for a process of one's own self-transformation. St. Luke summarizes Mary's story about the birth of her baby: "But Mary kept all these things, pondering them in her heart" (Lk 2:19). Mary lived in meditative remembrance of events taking place in front of her or in her. They were great salutary events in human history. We also do the same, but in order to do this our memory goes to the past, re-awaken them into the present, get inspired by them here and now and in the light of which project our life for the future. "Memory of the future" is a contradiction in terms, but it makes some sense, if we look at the memory of the past with its potential power of change within us. This is the change of self-transformation in the process of our divinisation. This is the goal to which our life is targeted. It is the meeting of my beloved Lord in heaven and of my desire to be transformed into him. We look forward to this happening with great hope. Hope is, thus, "a memory of the future," a remembrance of the past promises of the Lord, the realization of which is undoubtedly accepted and expectantly looked

forward to. Religious festivals are the most auspicious moments in which our memory gets identified with our hope.

3. The Particular and the Universal in Religious Festivals

Religious festivals are always celebrated in time as a distinguished moment of our lifespan. But it is also celebrated in a particular place, made holy by a living tradition of the people around that place. We call it a sacred place, just like we call the time of the festival a sacred time. Though the humans can pray to God at any place raising their hearts to God from any part of the world, people all over the world have developed a great tendency to earmark a particular place, common to all the members of the community, as a sacred place. People come there to pray, to offer sacrifice. This can be a big church, a small chapel, a tiny space around a tree or a stone, considered to be very central to the community. The ancient people of the world always thought that this sacred place is the centre of the world, the *axis mundi*. It was the assertion of the religious mind that this particular space, however small it is, virtually contained the universal for which the human soul yearns. This principle is basically accepted also in Christian tradition, which maintains that every particular church that can be culturally and administratively different from the other, thus, contains the universal church within itself. It is in this sacred place sacrifices are offered to God, which are said to be the navel of the universe. "This sacrifice is the navel of the universe: *ayam yajno bhavanasya nabhi*" (Rgveda I.164.35).

In a true religious celebration the boundary line between the particular and the universal vanishes. Just like time and eternity meet, so also in certain 'places' the particular and the universal meet and that is why the festivals are celebrated at that particular spot. In common parlance, a place becomes sacred by the touch of a person who lived there, or a divine apparition took place there. Many mountains or rivers are said to be sacred because of the stories or events attributed to those places. Thus, Kailas, where the Lord Shiva dwells, Shabarimala, where the Lord Ayyappan, an *avatara* of Shiva dwells, Sangham in Allahabad where the confluence (*sangham*) of three holy rivers (Ganga, Yamuna and Saraswathi) take place. Several other places where deities of gods or goddess are installed or sacred persons lived are considered holy in Hindu religious tradition. Festivals will be celebrated in all these places referring to the events that took place there or stories remembered in association

with those places, and the long and varied traditions people have inherited. The inner core of the sacredness attributed to any place is the fact that the universal or he who is beyond space and time has touched it and made it sacred, either directly or through the medium of some other agency.

The human dynamics of selecting sacred place and time can be seen in Christian traditions, too. Thus Christians consider Bethlehem, Jerusalem, Mount Calvary, and Tabor sacred, because of the physical touch of Lord Jesus on these places. Lourdes, Fatima and many other shrines dedicated to Mary have come out as specially acknowledged places of sacredness and celebrity, because of Mother Mary's apparition on that particular spot or because of a living tradition of some favours received from her. This is quite natural to human beings, because time and space are two basic dimensions of all embodied human beings. Sacred time and sacred space acknowledge to these dimensions while taking our body dimension to the inner content of the festivals celebrated.

4. Faith and Fidelity in Religious Festivals

All these external celebrations based on time and space do not make any sense without a corresponding internal content. This internal content, which is divine love on which the remembrance is based, is provided by faith. It is the believer who comes to celebrate the religious festival. Religious festival is not like a national festival. For example, Indians celebrate the day of Indian Independence on August 15. Even though there is the history of a long struggle for independence demanding a lot of sacrifice and even martyrdom of so many of Indian citizens, a national festival is not a religious festival in the strict sense of the word. This is because what is being celebrated is something understandable and attainable by reason and human effort. But August 15th is also a religious feast day for the Catholics all over the world. On this day is remembered the Assumption of our Lady into heaven. The celebration of this feast is not possible without Christian faith. The inner content of this festal celebration is the fact of faith that Mary, the Mother of Jesus, born immaculate, was assumed to heaven at the end of the earthly span of her life. Catholics all over the world accept this in Christian faith. A body that has not been tarnished by sin, or was singularly exempted from the all-pervading grip of the original sin, need not be subjected to the general process of disintegration; instead, it could be directly transformed into the glorious body of resurrection and assumed into heaven or into its final

destination of being with God, whatever way we conceive it. The entire dogmatic teaching of assumption depends on our faith in Jesus Christ, his salvific mystery, and Mary's unique and irreplaceable relation to Christ. The history of Jesus is very central to Christian faith. Many Christian festivals, covering the entire year of the liturgical cycle, are centred on what happened to Jesus and to the people intimately related to him. The entire system of festivals or the whole liturgical cycle is accepted in faith, a fitting response to the transcendent God who reveals himself to us in time and space.

Faith is a new way of seeing things through our inner eye, which is in effect the eye of the Holy Spirit, a parting gift of Jesus to all his disciples who are ready to deny themselves and follow his footprints. Just as an inner vision, faith is also an inner listening to the Word of God, uttered in silence, powerfully inviting the believer to a new awakening from within. To this newly awakened consciousness, which is a participation in the consciousness of Christ, as far as Christian faith is concerned, a firm decision of self-surrender is added. What is seen by the eye of faith is always accepted. Hence, faith is both seeing and surrendering at the same time. Jesus loved faith very much. This is because it is not like human knowledge, a logical or mathematical formula to which one may give one's consent or not. Faith on the contrary is always seeing and opting at the same time. Simple, unsophisticated, religious faith is very powerful. It is a tremendous source of spiritual power, enlightenment, enthusiasm and readiness for any sacrifice. It is faith that makes a festal celebration joyous, even if what is celebrated is a sacrifice. It is through sacrifice Jesus saved humanity, conquered death and brought the life eternal. Faith makes celebration joyful because it is not only the remembrance of sacrifice but also a hopeful memory of the effect of sacrifice in our lives. Faith and hope embrace each other in all joyful celebrations.

The dynamics of faith are deeply rooted in our human nature and are valid for all religions. Faith is the inner response to the Ineffable and the Invisible opening up in our hearts with an intense drive to be united with what is, thus, perceived and experienced. Hope or confidence in the one who is revealed becomes an inalienable associate of any true faith. It is the content of faith that differs, though in general they all have much in common as one's inner quest for the Absolute and the acceptance of

revelation which is a source of knowledge beyond the dynamics of human reason.

Thus, we have lot of festivals in Hinduism, which normally refer to the story of an *avatara* (descent of God) to the world in order to restore order and obliterate disorder in this world. The *Bhagavad Gita* puts it as follows:

Whenever, O descendent of Bharatha, there is decline of *Dharma*, and rise of *Adharma*, then, I body Myself forth. For the protection of the good, for the destruction of the wicked, and for the establishment of *Dharma* I come into being in every age (*BG* 4.7-8).

Accordingly stories differ. The remembrance of the triumph of the good over the evil, and the consequent liberation of good people from the iron grip of the evil power structure (king or demon) are celebrated in feasts and festivals. Thus, many of these festivals (e.g., Dussehra, Deepavali, Holy) have liberation stories behind them and do have some striking similarities with the festival of the *pasch*, which is also in essence a liberation story. But when Jesus celebrated the *pasch* he turned the liberation method upside down. Instead of killing the giant or evil king, Jesus opted to die for his people and liberate them from the threat of evil, not killing the person involved, but eradicating evil from the human hearts. In fact, this is the real liberation. True liberation is not the change of the role-play of the people, namely the oppressors becoming the oppressed and the oppressed, in turn, the oppressors. Something like this happened in the Bolshevik revolution in Russia; but in the long run it proved that it was not a right path to true and lasting liberation. In these kinds of revolutions always certain neglected values will be brought to light. This will be the attractive element for the masses. But since the whole movement is not based on genuine, selfless love, the human (actually animal) passion of aggressiveness and hatred will rule these revolutionary ventures, and as a result many will be indiscriminately massacred. The dignity of the human person will be trodden under feet and a lasting peace or a welfare state will not be evolved or established. Jesus, on the other hand, inaugurated a spiritual revolution in which he himself offered to be sacrificed.

Through self-sacrifice is liberation obtained. All are invited to sacrifice their egos, the puffed up 'I' that demands all for itself. Instead,

we are invited to look at the other with love and affection, as a member of our own human body, as an inalienable part of a complete wholeness. Such an attitude marks the happy dawn of a new society and that is what we celebrate in the paschal sacrifice. The idea is that a God-centred world is in the offing and we accelerate it by sacrificing our self-centredness. Indeed, it is something worth celebrating!

Before installing a deity in the temple or before inaugurating a movement or institution, a ritual (*puja*) is performed before a temple or a consecrated statue, and as a sacred ritual a coconut is broken into pieces and distributed to the people present there. By doing this, the performer, who can be a priest or a minister of the state or of the nation, proclaims that my or our self-centred world is destroyed or wilfully broken into pieces. From that day onwards we have a new God-centred world. Naturally, we have a good reason for a joyous celebration, though it involves a good spirit of self-sacrifice.

"This sacrifice is the navel of the universe," says the *Rgveda* (I.164.35). In the Vedic times the sacrifice was understood as the sacrifice of an animal to expiate the sins of the world. But here what is more important is the representative value of the animal. The animal sacrificed represents each one of us. Hence, when Jesus came, representing all of us, he said: "This is my body which is given for you. Do this in memory of me" (Lk 24:19). The eucharistic sacrifice is a memorial of what Jesus did; but at the same time it is also an invitation to place each one of us on the altar of sacrifice for the sake of others, for the sake of creating a more humane world, a more divine world for us to live in, now here on this earth. The origin of this new world order, centred on our self-sacrifice, and ultimately centred on the royal sacrifice of Jesus, we celebrate joyfully. All other religions, too, do celebrate the festivals of liberation. It is a right thing to be celebrated as a memorial of the victory of the good over the evil. But the idea of self-sacrifice for creating a better world for us to live in should be emphasized in all celebrations. Otherwise, it may become an empty celebration of our own ego-centeredness and aspired triumphalism.

Fidelity is the constant companion of faith. Faith and fidelity go hand in hand. Faith is an enlightened vision and surrender of oneself to what is seen and experienced, fidelity is the unswerving commitment for the perpetuation of this state of mind. Thus, fidelity is one's own

adherence to the faith one has embraced. True fidelity should be safeguarded against the onslaught of fanaticism, on the one hand, and reckless liberalism, on the other. When fidelity is pinned down to some of the minute details of living one's religion in a particular faith, which do not belong to the essence of that very faith, but are only variables in the process of realizing one's faith in time and space, fidelity turns out to be fanatic or fundamentalistic. This, certainly, is a distorted understanding of religion and faith. In the name of fidelity to the details of religious practices one should not abandon the greater principles of religion such as love, justice and truthfulness, which constitute the claim of Being or Reality over all of us. God is the absolute reality who alone has absolute claim over us. Whatever we think about God is not necessarily the real God who is certainly beyond our comprehension. Fundamentalists tend to think that what they think alone is the real truth of religion and, thus, criticize all others from their (limited) perspective. In one and the same religion several schools of theology and spiritual disciplines are welcome and is an acceptable tradition in the most of the great religions. However, all religions have a fundamental core experience of their own and a faithful religious follower keeps up this inner core of religion dear and near to his/her heart and lives accordingly. Such a life needs fidelity to one's own faith commitment. Hence, though true fidelity will try to avoid fundamentalism or fanaticism, such a person will equally avoid the other extreme of "a religion of permissiveness," namely an attitude that any religion is okay for me.

Religion is certainly a very personal and intimate option and is very fundamental to the one who opts. Hence, we have to respect this true option of a person for his or her religion. This means that I remain faithful to my own religion, which alone makes my in-depth celebration of a festival meaningful to me. If at all I choose another religion, it is again the result of a long search and very personal and responsible decision for my ultimate concern which is centred on my relationships to my God and my people. Fidelity is, therefore, always personal, intimate and grows in depth and greater interiority, and ever remains creative, overcoming the challenges and temptations arising from the fleeting values of the world and its concerns.

5. Cults and Culture in Religious Festivals

The English literature has three words strikingly inter-related in etymology and meaning. The Latin word *cultus* means "religious worship" and the English word 'cult' is supposed to be originated from this Latin word. In the ancient world cult and culture were very much inter-related than in our modern times. Great cultures of the world arose in the cool shade of religions. They both shared a lot of insights, expressions of worship patterns, religious music, dances and ceremonies. Festivals were the great occasions for such religio-cultural celebrations. Hence, there is importance for the question of cult and culture in religious festivals.

Faith is the inner core around which a cult is developed. Faith is, thus, the nucleus of any cult. In ancient days they were called "mystery cults." Mystery and cults get their great arena of celebration during the period earmarked for religious festivals. A cult may be performed in private, or in a smaller community as the expression of an individual's or community's faith. Even in that level the culture of the cult-performance plays a great role. This is because without a certain form of culture a human being cannot perform any action. Faith gives the content for a cult, but culture supplies its form. In a religious festival cult and culture embrace each other so intimately that in reality we find them always united and as one. This does not however mean that a religious cult can be performed only in one cultural form. In that case we will be identifying the inner core of cult with its cultural form. If faith is the internal content (internal form) of the cult, culture is the external form. If we identify the internal and the external forms, then we are destroying both cult and culture. Culture is very much restricted to several factors pertaining to time and space. Particular language, particular art form, particular place or milieu in which a cult finds its expression, is an example. If we insist that the cult which is essentially a memorial of mystery of faith can be celebrated only in this one particular pattern, then we are imposing undue restrictions on the inner content of faith, which is by nature transcendent as a memorial of a liberation story, and according to the genuineness of this mystery, every one on earth has a right to participate in it. If the content of the story or event is brought to another country and culture, naturally the cult will be celebrated in the culture of the place, to which belong its own language, music, dance and all other expressions of art and articulations.

Cultural variety of the same cultic content is something to be appreciated and encouraged in all religions in the world.

As we have already seen, most of the mystery cults were memorials of certain liberation stories. Festival of mystery cult was often remembrance of elaborate and creative mythical stories colourfully presented to the people as musicals, processions or even dance-dramas lasting for several days. When Christ came into history and celebrated the paschal mystery in Jewish culture, he opened this cultic context to various cultural forms in the world. He defined the content of the cult saying "Whenever you gather together you do this in memory of me" (*Christian Missal*). But he obviously did not wish it to remain ever restricted to his own Jewish cultural form. Christianity has taken the content from this great commandment of Jesus and has celebrated the paschal mystery all over the world, preferably adapting to the cultural rhythm of the place, but ever remaining faithful to the original celebration, the sacrifice of Christ for the world and our participation in this great cosmic sacrifice. Jesus also brought about certain important changes in the meaning of the celebration. It is no more just the memory of the liberation of the Israelites from the slavery of the Egyptians (which is not totally excluded, though), but much more is the memory of the liberation of humanity from the strings of sinfulness and death through the self-sacrificing death of Jesus on the cross, which took place the very next day. "Do this in memory of me." The priest, the one who offers the sacrifice along with the community of the people with him, is asked to follow the example of Jesus' sacrificial death, which is being remembered and celebrated. It effectively means that, according to the mind of Jesus, all have to identify themselves with Jesus as the priest and, at the same time, as the victim of the sacrifice. A more human and a more sacred world is brought about on this earth not only by the sacrifice of Jesus, but also by our self-sacrifice along with the sacrifice of the high priest Jesus. Therefore, St. Paul says: "I rejoice in my suffering..." (Col 1:24).

Cult is culture-bound. Faith is primarily an internal experience and cult is its spiritual articulation and culture helps to express its due rhythm and harmony. We have to cultivate a taste for cult and culture. The word 'cultivate' stems from the root 'cult' (*cultus*) and is to be understood as catering, taking care of, preserving and developing one's own culture and cultic life. We usually use the word cultivation as related to the field. We

have to cultivate the paddy field or the earth that it may yield flowers and fruits. The eating and gardening habits, all belong to one's culture. We have to cultivate good taste for religious values, virtues which are flowers and fruits of the soul. "I will write my law on the walls of your heart" says the Lord (Jer 31:31). To culture belong not only the choicest plates and plants of the earth, but also the good manners and traditions people cultivate and preserve in their culture.

Religious festivals are the auspicious moments in which people's culture as well as their cultural values gets exultant and exuberant expressions. They should not be secularised to the extent of eclipsing the religious values and virtues arising from the spirit and its language of faith. A culture of globalisation brings in all alien forms of eateries and drinks to the market over the holy premises of the temples and churches. The festal celebration should not be an occasion to sell out all our cultural traditions, including that of eating habits, to the profit oriented alien markets. This is a wrong tendency of a misplaced jubilation, now plaguing the time-honoured cultural habitat of various countries.

6. Myths, Mystery and History in Religious Festivals

We have already spoken about myth and mystery cults. But this was from the perspective of faith, because most of the religious festivals are centred on a mythical story of liberation. We have to see how myth or history becomes the centre of a religious festival. As we have already seen, religious festivals are centred on faith. Faith is centred on the human exigency to come in touch with the Absolute who is beyond all comprehension, as directly as possible. One way of doing this is by bringing down God to the earth by a very powerful and creative imagination, giving to God some forms, human or nonhuman, and making him part and parcel of human history. These stories played a great role in shaping the religious mind of the people and in course of time received venerable space and status in the hearts of the people concerned. Such ancient, powerful and influential religious stories of God's intervention in the world came to be known as myths. Myths, however, should not be understood as fairy tales or any novel or short story we see in the bookshops or in magazines. Myths confront the mystery of the human encounter with God. They try to answer many unanswered questions, not through the clear dialectics of logic, which is not totally excluded, but through the spontaneity of creative imagination into which are weaved

philosophical thinking, poetic intuition, musical flow and the search for the meaning of the realities of life.

Myths try to answer the question: "Why are their beings and not nothing." In our days, a great philosopher, Martin Heidegger, renewed our interest in this question by an analysis of human dynamics of thinking and poetising. Myths have tried to answer these questions from time immemorial in their own way of story telling, in which they brought gods and humans to the one platform of great dramatic scenes. Thus, we have the story of the Golden Egg from which the world originated, or of the sacrifice of the great *Purusha* from whom arose our universe and all in it, including the castes of humans, herds of animals, shawls of fishes in the waters and all other cosmic globes and galaxies. One single poem has answered all our questions. It is wonderful in the sense that it is a human attempt to ponder over the mystery of the origin of the things. They are not to be understood literally, to the word meaning of the text, but as a great vision delving deep into the mysteries of nature, human existence and above all the ultimate source of what is.

Creation myths are remembered and celebrated in many religious festivals as part of the grand celebration for many days. For example, the erection of the pole for flag (*kodimaram*) before the festivals as well as before setting up a stage for presenting the salvation story in a dance-drama, is meant to represent the *axis mundi*, around which our earth rotates. Myths have always tried to explore the unexplored grounds of the mystery, which the humans have confronted with from the very beginning and are remembered specially during the festival seasons.

In most of the religious festivals, God's intervention in the act of liberation or salvation of humanity is accepted, articulated in prose and poetry and is celebrated in colourful forms. Thus, we have the great Hindu festivals of *Dussehra*, the deliverance of the people of Mysore from the wicked reign of Mahishasura, the giant king, through the intervention of divine power, who comes down in the form of a many-handed goddess, the beautiful and powerful Durga. In the same way there are other liberation stories, joyfully remembered during the festival of Deepavali, the festival of lights, or of Holy, the festival of colours, etc. Onam and Pongal, two festivals celebrated in the South India, strike a different note. Both of them are harvest festivals. Pongal, widely celebrated in Tamil Nadu, is a festival of prosperity and points to the upward surge and the abundant

overflow of the boiling rice, a symbol of prosperity and welfare. Onam, the festival of Kerala, on the other hand, reminds us of the royal visit of a beloved king Mahabali whose benign reign, real or mythical, the people of Kerala remember lovingly. Though they are originally harvest festivals, we find some mythical stories attached to them. This may be a later development and points to the human exigency to bring heaven down to earth during the time of celebration.

Historicity of the story is not a seriously discussed issue in these festivals. Story, even if it is not historical, has a symbolic value. In this way myths greatly differ from fairy tales and impregnate great religious values in the minds of the believers. For Meerabhai, Lord Krishna is 'real'. She cannot think that he is only a figment of mind and, therefore, to be discarded. Krishna is a living symbol through which God has communicated to her throughout her life. The symbol, contained in the story, certainly has a history and is all the more made sacred by the devotion and celebration of a believing community for several centuries.

Inspiring religious myths are to be seen from this perspective and are to be treated with respect even by followers of other religions or secular ideologists. This is only an act of acceptance of my brother or sister with whom I make my pilgrimage to the Ultimate, though I do not literally share all the details contained in their faith. How do we make a distinction between the actual history of the person mentioned in a liberation story and of the symbol that is carried over to humanity through the person in the story? As regards many religious myths a search into the actual historicity of the person mentioned may be futile, and unnecessary. But a search into the symbol presented by this person is certainly worthwhile and greatly rewarding. Through a religious symbol God is made present to us and the intensity of the presence felt depends on the intensity of the faith of the believer. Though historicity has its own excellence, we have to understand that a myth as a symbol may work very powerfully in a believing heart, rather than the claim of historicity in a non-believing member of a religion. This is what Christians, who have lost faith, have to learn from the living religions of the East. It is faith that makes a religion worth living. Faith does not search, nor does it provide scientific reasons for the historicity of Christ. The conclusion of science and reason is not a substitute for faith in any religion. Faith is a vision enlightened by the grace of God. Historicity may become part of the inner content of certain

faith, for example, historicity of Christ in Christian faith or of the Buddha in Buddhist faith. In Hinduism the emphasis is more on the symbols given to us through ancient myths and mystery cults. One should carefully make the distinction between the historicity of the person in the story and of the symbolism of the person in the story. A symbol is a historical reality, too, and in that sense the story as a medium of religious transmission, has been effective for centuries and has become a working value in the heart of the believer. As we have already seen myths have tremendous power to evoke this attitude. But for all religions self-transformation must be the ultimate goal. To every celebration of religious festival, this concept of self-transformation must be added. Then, it is always worth celebrating.

7. Conclusion

The human beings are microcosms; or rather they are the microcosmic dwelling place for the divine. We come to the conclusion that the divine is in the humans because consciousness is in them. God alone is consciousness. "In the beginning was the Word" (Jn 1:1). Word represents consciousness. The *Upanishad* says: "*prajnam Brahman*" ("Brahman is consciousness"). It also says: "*ayam Atman Brahman*" ("this self is Brahman"), because there is consciousness in it. The Being, whose nature is consciousness, we call Spirit. God's Spirit comes down to us in the form of consciousness, as light and love. Because God in his love and mercy has decided to make the humans his own dwelling place, the humans have become the embodiment of divine consciousness. Because of the body, which is matter, characterized by ex-tension (tending to have parts beyond parts), the humans became subject to time and space: *subject to time*, because they are in a process, or even in an agony, of realization through the happenings in and around them. The humans are not the ever realized. They are to be realized forever; *subject to space*, because he or she possesses an extended body, which can be situated in a definite locality subject to change. The agony of realization is a becoming process in space and time, which makes this embodied consciousness really human. But because of consciousness, the story of becoming does not end there.

Consciousness, to say in human language, is a drop of divine self-awareness in the humans, as a drop of leaven in the dough, a seed in the ground. The symbols used by Jesus himself, shows that how divine consciousness in the humans is subject to growth and can become all-

pervading like leaven and all-rewarding like seeds sprouting, growing, and, finally, yielding fruits.

Religious festivals are rich and ritualistic times of celebrations, in which all these human and divine dimensions are brought into exuberant expressions. It always takes place in a space, in a particular locality, declared sacred by a long-standing tradition, which acknowledges some divine encounter or an event that has taken place in that specific place. In the same way, it always takes place in a definite time, on a particular day or for a few days as in the case of a prolonged celebration with a *Navarathri* before or an octave after. The chosen date/dates is marked in the calendar as an auspicious time (*muhurta* or *kairos*) in the span of ordinary time (*samaya* or *chronos*). Thus, we began this article dealing with these two fundamental human dimensions of religious festivals.

Then we proceeded to the core of the divine dimension of the same, namely, faith, which alone gives depth and meaning to the celebration. For some people the celebration may be limited to the jarring sound of music, and that too profane songs, and colours of decorations on the housetops and roadsides. To convert a religious celebration to such a profane vanity and vandalism is not only against the spirit of the festivals we celebrate, but also is an alarming disgrace to the whole human family. If God does not see faith in human hearts, all we give to the Lord, whose image we carry around in jubilation, is pure emptiness. On the other hand, even if we have genuine faith, we need come back to our human side to give expression to our faith. This is because faith is expressed through symbols and symbols are taken from the world and human history. Anything in the world can be a symbol, because it has come from God, and, therefore, it always points to God. Symbols are the visible signs of the invisible. Jesus, time and again, makes recourse to the symbolic value of the things in this world and uses them to teach us the truth about God and our relation with him. The symbol of the vine and branches is a brilliant example for this. We treated this in the section titled "Cult and Culture."

Finally, we came to the question of myth, mystery and history. We said that there are mythical and historical events. A mythical event may have a history of several centuries. This does not make the story narrated in the mythical event historical. We also saw that a mythical event can have power to evoke faith and commitment in the believer. God can very

well use a mythical event as a symbol of his power or saving grace. The story of Job narrated in the Old Testament could be an example, even if it is disputed whether this story is mythical or historical. The religious value of myth or symbol is not questioned. But if God really comes down into history as a human being, he should be born in a particular clan or tribe, in a particular family, in a particular time and place. Then only he will be hundred percent human. He must also be mortal in the sense that all human beings are mortal. The point is, therefore, whether God comes down to us through human blood or symbols. Here blood means to be born of a woman in a real human family. If a religion is based on such an event we call it historical, although every religion as such ever has a trans-historical dimension for it. It is for elevating the human beings beyond the frontiers of historicity and this-worldly timeliness religions come to the world as a helping mate to humanity. A religious festival can be centred on mythical or historical events. Celebration of a feast or festival is always a historical event taking place here and now, in place and time uniting the heavenly and the earthly, the divine and the human. The joy of such a celebration should be internal as well as external, bringing God's peace and harmony to the humans and to the entire universe. Festival is a joyful expression of the human acceptance of divine rhythm in our lives and in our universe.