

Indian Festivals and Christian Celebrations-3*

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Part II : Festival and Inculturation

B. The Culture of the Festival

Culture blooms in the season of festivals. Every form of art comes out in magnificent expression to celebrate the mystery of the feast. The inner spiritual breath of a culture expresses itself in festivals through ascetic practices of prayer and fasting while the joy of celebration is marvellously brought about by music and dancing. Pavilions and temporary temples of celebration are made and decorated with paintings and sculptures of various kinds. As people move into a festival mood they are surrounded by arts and artistic expressions of every sort. It is actually these cultural settings that give momentum to the festive mood of the people. A religious culture is both the driving force and the medium of expression of a festival celebration. Hence the question :

[1. *What is Culture ?*

Man's nature is culture-bound; but the critical study of culture is comparatively of later origin. It is difficult to define culture because it comprises so many factors of our life. Culture touches all aspects of our life, religious and secular, spiritual and corporeal, heavenly and earthly and so on. Originating from the word 'cult' meaning 'cultivation' culture points to any form of refinement that is brought about in any level of existence, the refinement of his consciousness and his relations with nature, man and God being the top objective towards which the culture moves. Several philosophers and

* See the articles in *WW XX* (July 1987) 163-168 and (September 1987) 252-258.

historians have tried to define culture with slightly different perspectives and accentuations. Some see culture as an organized way of life which is based on a common tradition and conditioned by a common environment. The culture of a nation largely points to certain common values and standards of behaviour. [Having these in common does not mean uniformity in celebrations. India is a land of different races and tribes. Hence Indian culture is really a mosaic of many varied cultures, all of which participate in different ways in the great stream of an ancient culture. Accordingly the celebrations of a festival may differ from place to place, and yet find their unity in what they intend to celebrate.] As Clifford Geertz defines culture as follows.

Culture denotes an historically transmitted pattern of meanings embodied in symbols, a system of inherited conceptions, expressed in symbolic forms by means of which human beings communicate, perpetuate and develop their knowledge about and attitudes towards life².

Vatican II in its constitution on the 'Church in the Modern World' describes culture in the following way :

The word 'culture' in its general sense indicates all those factors by which man refines and unfolds his manifold spiritual and bodily qualities. It means his effort to bring the world itself under his control by his knowledge and his labour. It includes the facts that by improving customs and institutions he renders social life more human both within the family and in the civic community. Finally, it is the feature of culture that throughout the course of time man expresses, communicates, and conserves in his works great spiritual experiences and desires, so that these may be of advantage to the progress of many, even of the whole human family³.

2. C. Geertz, *The Interpretation of Culture*, London 1975, p. 89.

3. Vat. II, *Gaudium et Spes* 53.

Man and his activity cannot be understood or evaluated without the background of his culture. This is all the more so when we deal with the problems of festivals where man is at his best in his cultural expressions.

2. *The Dynamics of Festival Culture*

Festival culture is a periodic expression of man's inherent values and attitudes. In this exuberant outpouring of himself he combines inner spirit with external forms in such a way that the one takes him spontaneously to the other. This integration of spirit and form is the essence of any art product. It is the expressiveness of the content in the form that makes a work really a piece of art. All festivals are not celebrated in the same way. People envisage forms of expression befitting to the content to be expressed. Thus for *Deepavali*, which is a festival of light, people decorate their homes with lamps, whereas to celebrate *holi*, which is a festival of liberation, they sing and dance and walk around, freely sprinkling colours on human bodies. Selection of appropriate forms to bring out the inner consciousness is the key for celebration. Sometimes it can happen that the chosen form of expression is too imperceptible and the celebration may turn to be rather melancholic and pathetic. Sometimes on the other hand forms of expression may go out of control and the jubilation of a festival may then end up in unhappy events. Much depends on the mood and mentality of the people celebrating the festivals, the social milieu in which they live and the value system that is at work in the society. These factors are to be taken into serious consideration when we come to the Christian adaptation of festivals. No form should be chosen that really fails to express the inner content which we want to celebrate. But in general the forms are acceptable as they flow from the natural rhythm of human nature and are meant to elevate man to a sacred world of freedom and deliverance.

Another important factor with regard to the culture of festivals is their all-embracing character. There is the culture of the elite and the culture of the poor and the ordinary ones.

Brahmabandhav Upadhyaya's famous hymn *Vande Saccidanandam* or I.C. Chacko's masterpiece *Kristushasranamam* (Thousand Names of Christ) is the result of a highly sophisticated culture, though given to music, all seem to enjoy their musical rhythm. This is exactly what happens in the culture of the festivals. Festivals are common to all people. The rich and the poor, the erudite and the illiterate, all celebrate the festivals. Of course, the festival of *holi* celebrated in the Santiniketan campus will be much different from the same celebrated in a remote village in the country. Yet festivals are the most effective means of reaching out to the ordinary man. Christian adaptation of Indian festivals is especially imperative from this standpoint because many Christians, especially in the North, are simple and ordinary people with a lower status in the society. They are living as an insignificant minority among huge crowds of surrounding Hindus who occasionally celebrate their festivals. To deprive the Christians from such a festive mood of the people will be a very unkind approach to religion. What we can rightly do is to make the celebration meaningful from a Christian perspective.

C. The Christian Adaptation of the Indian Festivals

The Christian adaptation of Indian festivals is a specific field in which we have to apply the principles we have seen so far. It demands a real incarnational process. Festivals are further details of our basic liturgical life centred around the paschal mystery of Christ. The spirit of Jesus should enter and transform the inner content and the outer expression of a festival. Transformation does not mean removal or substitution. Transformation here means actually retaining the spiritual and cultural content of a festival and filling it with the Spirit of Christ. Christian vision of love and salvation should pervade every aspect of the festival. On the other hand, the Christian faith vision has to receive flesh from the cultural heritage of the people in order to bring into expression what the faith wants to celebrate. This is done by reconceiving the myth, mystery and cult dimension of the festivals.

1. *The myth/mystery dimension*

The festivals are always centered on a myth. Myth definitely conveys some mystery. The myth may be transformed by the mystery dimensions of Christian faith. The salvation event that took place in and through Jesus Christ becomes the major mystery factor in a Christian's life. Hence pure myths unrelated to the Christ-event may not be the content of a Christian festival. But at the same time myths that are being celebrated in festivals are not simply fairy tales or stories. Myths bring to light certain dimensions of our existence, certain predicamental situations in which we all participate, from which we all need deliverance. So the situation has to be looked into from this angle and to be reviewed from the angle of the salvation event which took place in Jesus Christ. In short, the content of mystery is transformed.

2. *Cult*

The transformed mystery is to be brought into expression through rituals. The rituals are expressed through the means of symbols, literature, music and art. Rituals could very well be adapted from the festivals, provided they do not contradict the basic content of the Christian mystery. Only in this way the celebration will be both Christian in content and indigenous in expression.

3. *Celebration*

When the mystery is transformed and the ritual adapted with the necessary changes, the sense of celebration will naturally be different. The real *utsava* from a Christian point of view will be the deliverance from sin brought about by Jesus Christ.

In the following articles we hope to present to you the nature and the dynamics of each Indian festival and a possible Christian re-interpretation of the same. The articles on each

festival will be concluded with a model prayer service suitable to the celebration of the festival treated.

The mind of the Church in these matters is clear from what we have already said. I would like to conclude this section bringing to our notice yet another passage which the Church officially spoke to all her faithful when she dealt with problem of the Church's relationship to non-Christian Religions.

The Catholic Church rejects nothing which is true and holy in these religions. She looks with sincere respect upon those ways of conduct and of life, those rules and teachings which, though differing in many particulars from what she holds and sets forth, nevertheless often reflect a ray of that Truth which enlightens all men. Indeed, she proclaims and must ever proclaim Christ, "the way, the truth, and the life" (John 14 : 6), in whom men find the fullness of religious life, and in whom God has reconciled all things to Himself (cf. 2 Cor. 5 : 18-19).

The Church therefore has this exhortation for her sons : prudently and lovingly, through dialogue and collaboration with the followers of other religions, and in witness of Christian faith and life, acknowledge, preserve, and promote the spiritual and moral goods found among these men, as well as the values in their society and culture⁴.

4. Vat. II. *Nostra Aetate*. The Declaration on the Relationship of the Church to Non-Christian Religions 2.