Dusshera, Diwali and Christian-Hindu Dialogue

By Leon Bent -
“Dasara, derived from the Sanskrit *Dasha-hara* meaning “remover of bad fate”, is among the most important festivals celebrated in India. Regional spellings include *Dashera, Dussera* and *Dussehra*; following the ten-day festival of *Navratri*.

*Diwali*, the festival of lights, is celebrated 20 days after *Dussehra*. *Diwali*, or *Dipawali* or *Deepawali*, is India’s biggest and most important holiday of the year. The festival gets its name from the row (*avali*) of clay lamps (*deepa*) that, Indians light outside their homes to symbolize the inner light that protects from spiritual darkness.

Dear Hindu Friends,

I am pleased to offer my cordial greetings to all of you on the occasion of the joyful feast of *Diwali*. It restores your religious vigour and enhances in you, a renewed purpose to continue on the path which is prescribed by your religious tradition. I believe that such feasts are not purely social events but are, so to speak, meaningful junctures in the life of human beings who are essentially religious by nature. Feasts, such as *Diwali*, are, therefore, particularly a time to reflect on the deeper and ultimate purpose of our life.

*Diwali*, or *Deepavali*, is the Hindu festival of lights. One of the most popular festivals of Hinduism, *Diwali* symbolises the spiritual “victory of light over darkness, good over evil and knowledge over ignorance”. During the celebration, temples, homes, shops and office buildings are brightly illuminated (Message Of The Pontifical Council, For Inter-Religious Dialogue, To The Hindus, On The Feast Of Diwali, (27 October 2000); Cardinal Francis Arinze, President).

It is Pope John Paul II who, during his last journey to India, reminded us once again that the “Catholic Church wants to enter ever more deeply into dialogue with the religions of the world. She sees dialogue as an act of love which has its roots in God himself. ‘God is love’,
proclaims the New Testament, ‘and whoever remains in love remains in God and God in him...Let us love, then, because he has loved us first...no one who fails to love the brother whom he sees, can love God whom he has not seen’ (First Letter of St. John, 4:16, 19-20)’”

[Meeting at Vigyan Bhavan with Representatives of Other Religions and Christian Confessions, 7th November 1999].

The 16th-century Portuguese traveller, Domingo Paes wrote of his visit to the Hindu Vijayanagara Empire, where Dipavali was celebrated in October, with householders illuminating their homes, and their temples, with lamps.

Islamic historians of the Delhi Sultanate and the Mughal Empire era, also mentioned Diwali and other Hindu festivals. A few, notably the Mughal emperor Akbar, welcomed and participated in the festivities.

A Hindu-Christian international conference on ‘Enlightenment and tantra’ was held in Rome. For Msgr. Spreafico, “ignorance brings many evils”. Cardinal Tauran noted Pope Francis’s many appeals in favour of dialogue. “Every religion and every believer thinks that his or her belief is the best’” said a Hindu scholar. Spirituality should be the starting point, the mystic said.

Rome’s Pontifical Gregorian University organised an International Conference on ‘Enlightenment and tantra – Christian and Hindus in dialogue’, Oct. 18, 2017, to coincide with the Hindu festival of Diwali. The symposium noted that although dialogue between Christians and Hindus is difficult, it is yet imperative to get to know one another, to appreciate the richness of the other.

Church leaders, representatives of the Hindu community, and scholars came from around the world. In his address, Mgr Ambrogio Spreafico, President of the Commission for Ecumenism and Interreligious Dialogue, of the Catholic Bishops’ Conference of Italy, stressed the current challenges faced by interfaith dialogue. Still, he noted that “It is imperative to know each
other because ignorance brings many evils.”

Card Jean-Louis Pierre Tauran, President of the Pontifical Council for Religious Dialogue, also mentioned the Pope’s openness. In his welcome speech the Cardinal quoted from Amoris Laetitia (No. 139): “Keep an open mind. Don’t get bogged down in your own limited ideas and opinions, but be prepared to change or expand them.”

Prof. R Sathyanarayana, of the École française d’Extrême-Orient, in Podinchertry, India, also underlined the need for greater involvement between Christians and Hindus. “There is an extreme need for interreligious dialogue,” he told AsiaNews. “Every religion and every believer thinks that his or her belief is the best, but there should be more ties; religions should embrace one another.”

The 12th century Abbess Hildegard of Bingen said: “As the Creator loves his creation, so creation loves the Creator. Creation, of course, was fashioned to be adorned, to be showered, to be gifted with the love of the creator. The entire world has been embraced by this kiss.”

Fr. Bede Griffiths was an English Benedictine monk, who spent 50 years in India, living and building an ashram that was Christian and, in many respects, Hindu. He wrote a number of books on the coming together of Eastern and Western mysticism.

Thomas Merton, developed a pantheistic identification with God, as does his present day devotee, William Shannon. “I suddenly saw all the secret beauty of their hearts, the depths of their hearts, where neither sin nor desire nor self-knowledge can reach, the core of their reality, the person that each one is in God’s eyes. If only they could or see themselves as they really are. If only we could see each other that way all the time. There would be no more war, no more hatred, no more cruelty, no more greed....”

Deep down, each one of us is a mystic. When we tap into that energy we become alive again and give birth. From the creativity that we release is born the prophetic vision of equality,
respect, reverence, peace, harmony, love, compassion and mercy for all human beings, irrespective to which religious persuasion they belong.

William Johnston, a great mystic and renowned writer, after the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965), noted: “Vatican II acknowledged that the Spirit of God is at work in all peoples and in all religions. Since then, most theologians recognize non-Christian religions as ‘valid ways’” to the One, True God!

The Buddhist leader Dalai Lama on visiting the grave of Thomas Merton at Gethsemane Abbey, prayed, “Now our spirits are one.”

Each one of you, dear readers, rest silently in the presence of the great mystery that envelops the whole universe.

Leon Bent is an ex-Seminarian and studied the Liberal Arts and Humanities, and Philosophy, from St. Pius X College, Mumbai. He holds Masters Degree in English Literature and Aesthetics. He has published three Books and have 20 on the anvil. He has two extensively “Researched” Volumes to his name: Hail Full of Grace and Matrimony: The Thousand Faces of Love. He won The Examiner, Silver Pen Award, 2000 for writing on Social Issues, the clincher being a Researched Article on Gypsies in India, published in an issue of the (worldwide circulation) Vidyajyoti Journal of Theological Reflection, New Delhi. On April, 28, 2018, Leon received the Cardinal Ivan Dias Award for a research paper in Mariology.
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