

Inter-faith column 8: Celebrating Festivals

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As we approach the central festival of our Christian faith, I'm reminded that every faith tradition has festive celebrations which bring its community together to be reminded of the essential truths of their religion. Indeed, in some faiths, such as Zoroastrianism, communal worship is only done on the festival days, with all other worship done in the homes as private prayer. We also know many Christians who only attend worship on Christmas and Easter!

When it comes to holiday celebrations, we Christians have long adapted the traditions of others for our own purposes. Some would say we have 'colonised' the holidays; others say we've recognised God's presence in other celebrations and have refashioned them, attempting to theologically 'make all things new,' pointing towards God as Lord of all.

For instance, our UK churches celebrate Harvest, but nearly every culture celebrates Harvest in some form: Sukkot, the Festival of Booths, in the Jewish tradition; Pongal at the time of the sugar cane harvest in S Indian Hinduism; Mid-Autumn festival in Chinese-speaking countries; Thanksgiving in the USA.

New Year celebrations are found in virtually every tradition, though some religions mark it by the solar calendar and others by the lunar. John Wesley was keen to commemorate the New Year with the Covenant Service – a way of taking a cultural celebration and using it as a focus for our spiritual development.

The celebration of Christmas, which has Christ in its name, only became popular during the Victorian era. The date of Christmas was generally agreed to be in winter, so the pagan festival of Saturnalia was 'Christianised.' As a festival which already featured feasting, gift-giving, and role reversals such as masters serving their slaves, Saturnalia seemed ripe for converting into an occasion to honour the role reversal of God coming to be with us.

It's not too hard to recognise that our Maundy Thursday commemorations are linked with the Jewish Passover (which John's Gospel emphasises repeatedly). Likewise, Pentecost, which we Christians have adopted as the time of the coming of the Holy Spirit, comes from the Jewish festival fifty ('pente') days after Passover.

Surely Easter is a truly Christian holiday -- or is it? The word 'Easter' comes from the name of the Saxon fertility goddess, Eostre (think: estrogen), hence the abundance of rabbits and chicks and eggs in popular celebrations. Surely Jesus' resurrection gives us new life, so the Christian celebration gives new meaning to an ancient festival, proclaiming: Christ makes all things new.

Perhaps the only truly Christian holiday is Good Friday. Though its date is closely linked with Passover and Easter celebrations, no other faith tradition commemorates the death of their Saviour. Muslims and Jews find this concept particularly distasteful: crucifixion was a curse; it proved to them that Jesus was not the godhead, for the everlasting, eternal God cannot die. We Christians would argue that we can observe the death on Good Friday because we know that Resurrection Sunday follows, but even resurrection is a questionable concept (though not unknown) in the other Abrahamic faiths. (Zoroaster had taught a principle of resurrection of the dead several centuries earlier).

The Hindu god, Shiva, is known as the god of destruction – destroying evil, ignorance, and death itself. Hindus understand that this destructive power is what allows goodness, knowledge, and life to be created and flourish. As in Buddhism, this belief is linked to reincarnation: one form of life must die before another comes to life. But reincarnation is not the same as resurrection; we Christians believe we are not in an endless cycle of rebirth, based on the merits or shortcomings of our previous lives. We believe that God came to live with us and was willing to die at the hands of evil in humanity – and then to be resurrected to show that life and goodness are indeed stronger than death, thus redeeming human life into all its intended original goodness.

It is a tall claim to make! Perhaps, like most of the secular culture around us, it's easier to celebrate bunnies and chicks and eggs on Easter Day. But we also know that the true victory comes after the hardest fight. Easter would be much less significant without Good Friday.

So how shall we mark Good Friday, this most Christian date on the calendar? Many Churches Together will have Walks of Witness through public streets. I remember similar processions in India, when someone had died, and everyone would show up to pay their respects. Similarly, people from many faith traditions join a Good Friday Walk in India, paying their respects to one who was killed unjustly. When we carry the cross through our streets as well, we're acknowledging our own part in that injustice.

Some will commemorate Good Friday with the Stations of the Cross or services which recall the Seven Last Words of Jesus. Others will attend a Tenebrae service in which lights are progressively extinguished until all is in darkness. Some will fast throughout the day. Many will not bother at all. The most holy of Christian holy-days will simply be a time to catch up on errands or get ready for the Easter 'holidays'.

Viewing Good Friday and Easter from the perspective of other faith traditions forces us to consider: what and why and how are we commemorating? What is most essential to our faith? How do we bear witness to our crucified and risen Lord?