

confronted with other heathen religious rites.

What, then, are Hindu death anniversary celebrations? Hinduism contains so many different, sometimes contradictory, teachings and is split into so many opposing sects that a single answer applicable to all Hindus is probably not possible. Nevertheless, writers on Hinduism assure us that “authoritative opinions”<sup>1</sup> on Hindu doctrines are obtainable. In particular, the death rite “is still performed today by practically all Hindus, orthodox as well as liberal.”<sup>2</sup> To answer our question, let us turn to the Hindu customs of the city of Banaras.

Banaras (also known as Varanasi or Kashi), a city of northern India, has a special connection in Hinduism with death. Indeed, sick and dying Hindus from all over India will travel to this city in an attempt to make it the place of their deaths. Their hope is to gain certain benefits after death, but when they die, Hinduism teaches them that their souls remain trapped inside their dead bodies. Here is what happens then:

The cremation rite is called the “last sacrifice” -- *antyeshthi*. The rite is, indeed, a sacrifice, having a certain structural continuity with all fire sacrifices in India, from the most complex to the most simple. What is prepared, ornamented, and offered into the fire is, in this case, the deceased. When the body arrives at the cremation ground, after the chanting procession through the lanes of Banaras, it is given a final dip in the River Ganges. It is sprinkled with the oil of sandalwood and decked with garlands of flowers. The deceased is honored as would befit a god . . .

It is the chief mourner, usually the eldest son, who . . . circumambulates the pyre counter-clockwise -- for everything is backward at the time of death. . . . He lights the pyre. The dead, now, is an offering to Agni, the fire. Here, as in the most ancient Vedic times, the fire conveys the offering to heaven.

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1. K. K. Klostermaier, *A Survey of Hinduism*, Albany: State University of New York Press, 1989, p. 15.

2. *Ibid.*, p. 180.

After the corpse is almost completely burned, the chief mourner performs a rite called *kapalakriya*, the “rite of the skull,” cracking the skull with a long bamboo stick, thus releasing the soul from entrapment in the body. . . . The members of the funeral party do not grieve openly, for it is said that many tears pain the dead.<sup>3</sup>

Thus, Hinduism teaches what happens after death: the soul leaves the body when the skull is cracked open. But where does it go?

Death is dangerous because it is a time of transition. It is a liminal or marginal time, a space between life and life. In this transitional period, the soul is called a *preta*, literally one who has “gone forth” from the body but has not yet arrived at its new destination.<sup>4</sup>

This is the crucial point for our present interest because the ceremonies performed by the living relatives are, according to Hinduism, what brings the soul to its final (blessed) destination. Meanwhile, a temporary body is occupied by the deceased:

. . . a body that will be subject to tortures and suffering in relation to the sins committed.<sup>5</sup>

This body is sometimes said to be built up by means of the Hindu rites performed after the cremation.

The rites following the cremation enable the *preta* to become a *pitri*, an ancestor, or more precisely, a “father.” Without such rites, one might remain a homeless *preta* for a long time.<sup>6</sup>

These rites begin after the cremation.

The rites . . . consist of daily offerings of rice balls, called *pindas*, which provide a symbolic, transitional body for the dead. During these days, the dead person makes the journey to the heavens, or the world of the ancestors, or the “far shore.” As a whole, these rites are called *shraddha*, or *pindadana*, the “offering of *pindas*.” The rites also include the providing of

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3. D. L. Eck, *Banaras: City of Light*, New York: Knopf, 1982, pp. 340-341.

4. *Ibid.*, p. 342.

5. Klostermaier, p. 182.

6. Eck, p. 342.

feasts for a group of brahmins, who take nourishment on behalf of the dead.<sup>7</sup>

The offering of the *pinda* is made with the following words

May this *pinda* benefit the *preta* of so-and-so of this family so that his ghost may not feel hunger and thirst.<sup>8</sup>

Moreover, failure to perform these death rites will cause the *preta* (the soul of the deceased) to become a *pishacha* instead of a *pitri*.

A *pishacha* is a “fiend” or a “goblin.” One scholar describes them as “eaters of raw flesh,” “evil elves,” “half-fabulous, half-human.” *Pishachas* are also the unsatisfied spirits of the dead, especially the spirits of those . . . whose death rites were improperly performed. Being a *pishacha* is a wretched in-between state of being, neither in this world nor in the world of the ancestors. . . . doomed . . . for 300,000 years.<sup>9</sup>

Therefore, the prime object of the death rites is to accomplish the transformation of the *preta* into a *pitri* without a hitch.

. . . the admission of the *preta* into the circle of the *pitrs* is obtained through the *sapindikarana* [the name of the death anniversary ceremony], which normally takes place one year after death.<sup>10</sup>

This then is the object and meaning of the Hindu death anniversary rite. On that occasion the soul of the deceased joins his ancestors, avoids becoming a fiend, becomes “a complete being,” attains total fulfillment as a man. No wonder this rite is called “one of the most important parts of Hindu cult.”<sup>11</sup>

Now if dying at Banaras is attended with special benefits to the one who dies, why should these ceremonies be performed there just as they are performed in other places?

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7. *Ibid.*, pp. 341-2.

8. Klostermaier, p. 182.

9. Eck, p. 339.

10. Klostermaier, p. 182.

11. *Ibid.*, p. 182

According to the very cautious, the rites do no harm and one can never be too careful. According to the very thoughtful, these rites and the sense of ongoing connection with the loved one that they engender are as much for the living as the dead. For most Hindus, however, the question of this seeming contradiction does not arise. One always does these things, for they are the right things to do, even in Kashi [Banaras]. It is the *dharma* [duty, law, righteousness; religious duties] of the living to perform rites for the dead.

Thus, what we have learned about death rites at Banaras applies in a general way to all or most Hindus elsewhere. So we must ask, Is it safe, or comforting for the relatives, or a part of righteousness for a Christian, to participate in such a ceremony? Let us look at what Gal. 4:10 has to say:

Ye observe days, and months, and times, and years.

In its context, this means that the Galatians were observing the religious rites and customs of Judaism. William Kelly had this to say about its meaning:

*Not* to do this now is the wonder. Alas! the Galatian evil is thought a proof of religion. He marks this observance, not merely as an error, but as a proof of idolatry.<sup>13</sup>

“A proof of idolatry” is strong language, but let us remember that our question is somewhat different. We are asking about *Hindu* customs, not *Jewish* ones. So whatever this verse means, we ought not to take the verse exactly as it stands; instead we should take from the verse the mind of the Lord on Jewish rites in order to apply it to the question of participation in heathen religious rites and customs. Is that going too far from the text of the verse?

Well, William Kelly has commented on this passage in such a way as to give his thoughts on

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12. Eck, p. 343.

13. W. Kelly, *Lectures on the Epistle of Paul the Apostle to the Galatians*, Oak Park: Bible Truth Publishers, 1973, p. 103.

those who participate in unscriptural religious rites and customs in Christendom (which he did not confine to Roman Catholicism):

. . . what a sin to take part in, to countenance or sanction, in any way, that which is idolatry in God's judgment! <sup>14</sup>

Another who labored long in China had this to say about the idols that are spoken of in Gal. 4:8:

It includes the ancestors whom so many worship . . . True Christianity refuses any mixture such as this. Christianity is the most tender, gentle, loving thing in all the world. No sinner is too bad to receive a welcome. But Christianity is also the sternest and strongest opponent of anything and everything that men wish to add to it, or mix with it. True Christianity is the most exclusive thing in all the world. I mean by this exclusive of sin and falsehood. True Christianity will not tolerate having forms and ceremonies added to it. True Christianity will not tolerate any addition, or any mixture, not even God's law. All such in God's sight are simply heathenism and idolatry. You have noticed how fervent, how intense, how stern is the Epistle to the Galatians. What have they done? Have they committed some great sin? Listen, "I am frightened about you: days you are scrupulously observing, and months, and seasons, and years." <sup>15</sup>

Although these remarks on the participation by professing Christians in Jewish holidays and rites (with references both to unscriptural rites in Christendom and to Chinese ancestor worship) are not exactly what we are looking for, can anyone doubt that consistent Christians should stay farther away from heathen rites than from Jewish ones (which have, at least, an Old Testament origin from God)? So the strong language quoted above could be retained and augmented in order to give a correct answer to our question.

There is a passage of Scripture that does directly

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14. *Ibid.*, p. 102.

15. G. C. Willis, *Meditations on Galatians*, Singapore: Christian Book Room (of Shanghai), n. d., pp. 118-9.

apply to the question we are considering:

But that what [the nations] sacrifice they sacrifice to demons, and not to God. Now I do not wish you to be in communion with demons. Ye cannot drink [the] Lord's cup, and [the] cup of demons: ye cannot partake of [the] Lord's table and of [the] table of demons. Do we provoke the Lord to jealousy? are we stronger than he? (1 Cor. 10:20-22).

Here is a verse which exactly meets the specific case of the Hindu death anniversary celebrations that we are considering. The angry spirits, the *pretas* and *pishachas*, of the Hindus are not the spirits of their deceased parents. There is a great gulf fixed that prevents movement of the spirits of the departed so that they cannot come back again. Indeed, it took an act of God to send Samuel to the witch (medium) at Endor who was actually looking for the demon with whom she usually consulted. Yes, these spirits are demons. The *pindas* are set out to feed demons. Those who eat them on behalf of the spirits of their dead ancestors do so on behalf of demons. The moral ground which defines the gathering for that purpose is called in this passage of Scripture a "table of demons." A cup of water poured out for the thirsty *preta* is a literal "cup of demons." There are consequences to those who participate in such ceremonies.

"Ye cannot drink [the] Lord's cup, and [the] cup of demons" is a clear statement of impossibility. Note the word "cannot." Now it is physically possible for a man to participate in such a ceremony on Saturday and to come to the breaking of bread on the Lord's day. What does the verse mean? It means that there is a moral and spiritual impossibility in such a case. The assembly of God must put away from its midst that wicked person to clear itself of being in communion with demons and thus prevent any such thing where the name of the Lord Jesus Christ is in the midst.

Yes, that is just exactly what verse 20 teaches. If an assembly tolerates participation in such rites, the assembly is in communion with demons and the apostle writes, "I do not wish you to be in

communion with demons." If the assembly refuses to act, can the Lord Jesus Christ remain in the midst of such an assembly? Perish the thought! The Holy and the True can not tolerate such a wicked communion. No assembly tolerating such an evil can be owned as standing on the ground of the assembly as presented in the Bible.

That sums up what this article has to say on the subject of participation by Christians in Hindu death anniversary ceremonies. May you never run across such a ceremony. But perhaps you will as Eastern religious practices are spreading in the USA. Then what will you do? What would you say about just going to observe, not to eat of the *pindas*? -- would that make you less than a "participator"? What would you say about just joining in with the comfort side of things for the sake of the grieving relatives, leaving before they begin the Hindu part? Isn't that just what the thoughtful Hindus say is what they stress? Or what would you say about just participating in an ecumenical sense, adding a little Christianity to the occasion without endorsing Hindu doctrines? how can you avoid endorsement when you are already there for the occasion? Or would you say that because you feel free to attend a marriage of a living bridegroom and his bride, you also feel free to join in a ceremony whose object it is to offer some benefit to the dead? Is liberty to attend an institution of God (marriage) an excuse for attending at a table of demons? Where will you draw the line? Where does the apostle Paul draw the line?

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## ***Is There Room in Gal. 4:10 for Participation by Christians in Hindu Death Anniversary Celebrations?***

The religious rites and customs in the world may be divided into three categories: heathen rites, Jewish rites and the rites of Christendom. The purpose of this article is to explore the question of how a real Christian ought to consider the heathen rites that he may encounter in the world around him. In particular we will consider the Hindu death anniversary celebration in order to give a clear focus to our thoughts.

Christians do not believe in reincarnation because they know what really does happen after death. Often, Hindu teachings on reincarnation are so well known that other Hindu doctrines about what happens after death are overlooked. For example, Christian relatives or friends of a deceased Hindu could be invited to a get-together on the first anniversary of the death without knowing what the meaning of the occasion is. The remembrance of the person who died might comfort those who still have a sense of loss; possibly it might turn out to be an occasion at which a word about the Christian gospel could be spoken. Also, not attending such a family function could be interpreted by unsaved relatives as lack of love or interest. Lastly, Gal. 4:10 has something to say to us on this subject, and the teaching of the apostle Paul is the goal to which this article tends. Even if most readers have little contact with Hinduism, the principles discussed below may be of practical help to them if they are ever