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In My Opinion

Christian Affront on Diwali

Let us embrace those of other faiths, but not at the expense of our own great tradition

By Viju Sidhwani, M.D.

Ever since we were young we attended the annual Diwali mela at South Street Seaport. Each year our family drove in to downtown Manhattan from the surrounding suburbs. Breathing in the panoramic views of the Big Apple, with the backdrop of a glorious sunset, we knew an evening of live dance performances, puppet shows and a display of exquisite fireworks bursting on a blanket of stars was soon to follow. This was our idea of Diwali.

This celebration is special to me not only because it is the biggest Hindu celebration of the year, but also because it is a tradition that binds me to other Hindu and Sikh youth of the New York area. Nearly every year I have enjoyed the crowds, delicious food and divine music that is characteristic of the street fair. However, this year for the first time I came across a group who prominently identified themselves as Indian Christian missionaries. They came not for the purpose of enjoying the mela or for observing the sacredness of the occasion, but with the intention of converting Hindus and Sikhs to Christianity.

Among the other street vendors, this group set up a table to distribute Christian literature and free water to passersby. One person among them brought color-coordinated T-shirts proclaiming that Jesus is the only one. As the day progressed, the growing number of motivated evangelists infiltrated the crowds in the streets.

For much of the afternoon I saw them mobbing innocent visitors, foisting upon

them bottled water and literature. I was handed a pamphlet by two men, one of them asking if I was interested in attaining peace. I accepted the literature and briefly perused it before asking them why they were preaching Christianity at a Diwali mela. One of the men rudely responded that America is a free country and that he had the right to freedom of speech. His counterpart cited the technicality that Diwali was over three weeks away and arrogantly added that his presence was not disturbing anyone because this was a community event open to everyone. I eventually told one of them that I was very happy being Hindu, to which he replied, "I am here to offer you something better." Turned off and insulted, I ended the conversation, indicating to them that their presence was unwarranted and their aggressive propagation of Christianity on such a noble occasion was impolite and indecent.

The competitive antagonism brought by the missionaries detracted from our festive celebration of the festival of lights as they made efforts to persuade members of our community to attend church and eventually convert to Christianity. Coerced conversion of faith is fundamentally offensive to the benevolent and peaceful dharmic traditions. While we as a unified community are pluralistic in our beliefs and encourage diversity amongst ourselves, we cannot welcome people who alienate us from our native ancestry and intend to annihilate a tradition that is thousands of years old.

We cannot continue to be so accepting of other schools of thought that we compromise the principles that allow our own people to flourish and our own faith to be nourished. Hindu and Sikh American youth need the opportunity to explore our culture and beliefs and to enjoy our festivals without facing intimidation by those who wish to lure them toward a belief system that does not accept our tradition's antiquity, greatness and accepting nature.

On the auspicious occasion of Diwali, let us propagate the true spirit of love and embrace our brothers and sisters, be they of different faiths, on the condition that we are venerated to a degree that is commensurate with our benevolent outlook of love and acceptance for all.

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