

# National Unitarian Fellowship

Affiliated to the General Assembly of Unitarian  
and Free Christian Churches

# Viewpoint



## *Religious Festivals*

Issue 255



Winter 2017

Registered Charity 1040294

## Introduction

As we move into and through winter to the early signs of spring, the following festivals demonstrate some common threads shared by most. Light in darkness, many times a candle being lit or lights being draped in houses and in the streets, exchanging of gifts and finally sharing food.

In this winter edition of the *Viewpoint*, an article Rev Peter Hewis wrote for an earlier edition, is again offered as it remains an excellent account of his personal experiences and thoughts on four of the great winter festival from Christianity, Hinduism and Judaism. Peter draws on them to enhance a Unitarian perspective of this season of winter festivals.

Rev Tony McNeile writes not only on the Winter Solstice and Imbolc on the 1<sup>st</sup> February, but also introduces us to Lupercalia on the 15<sup>th</sup> February, a pre-Christian festival, which is new to me as it may be to many of our readers. He demonstrates how traditions have borrowed and built on the ideas of each other.

I apologise to Naomi Linnell and our readers for omitting her poem in honour of the Sikh Festival on the Birthday of Guru Nanak, which was celebrated on the 4<sup>th</sup> November. This should have been included in the last edition of the *Viewpoint*. However, for good measure we are able to include it now and also her Christmas poem to suitably round off this edition, which asks the question; 'What can we give him?'

I have written brief accounts of, and given links to, other religious festivals of this season to complete this edition.

We would welcome submissions from readers for religious festivals in the Spring period of March, April and May. That will complete our theme for the year covering religious festivals.

I wish you all a time of light, loving, giving, receiving and the sharing of good food with those around you during this festive season.

*Joan Wilkinson*

## **I believe in candles, babies and Father - Mother Christmas** **Rev Peter Hewis**

### **Let me start with I believe in candles.**

Whilst serving my first church in Bethnal Green East London I started a candlelight carol service. As one of our members entered the church he muttered, "It looks like a Catholic Church with all these candles!" I reminded him that the candle was a universal symbol for light in the midst of darkness, and that long before Christianity began other people had used candles, cave dwellers, Hindus, Jews and much, much later, Christians. He seemed happy with those thoughts and enjoyed the service. Many years later I came across these words found in Brecon Cathedral.

Lighting a candle is a prayer  
when we have gone, it stays alight  
kindling in the hearts and minds  
of others the prayers we have  
already offered for them  
and for all, for the sad,  
the sick and the suffering;  
and prayers of thankfulness too.

Lighting a candle is a parable;  
burning itself out  
it gives light to others

Lighting a candle is a symbol  
of love and hope,  
of light and warmth.

Continuing the candle theme, every few years three great festivals of light overlap, **Diwali**, **Hanukkah** and **Advent** leading up to **Christmas**. At least once a term I conducted an assembly at a Special School in Hinckley, Leicestershire, where many of the children were severely

disabled, so any assembly and presentation had to be uncomplicated. On one of my Friday afternoon visits the three great festivals overlapped, Hindu, Jewish and Christian so we had four candles. I told the children that as they had been studying celebrations we would light four candles for different celebrations.

**The first candle was for a birthday, something that all children celebrate**, it happened to be our daughter's birthday so that was for her but then a boy called Peter came in and it was his birthday, so he was later invited to blow out the all the candles.

**The second candle was for Diwali. In brief Diwali is a Hindu Festival of light held around one of the darkest points of the year**, usually mid to late November. (*In 2017 the festival was held 18<sup>th</sup> October – 22<sup>nd</sup> October. Ed*). This festival celebrates the day when the Hindu God Rama returned to reclaim his kingdom after fourteen years in exile and houses all over India shine with tiny lights from clay lamps to welcome him. The lamps are also lit as a kind of wish, that Lakshmi, the goddess of prosperity will visit their homes. Diwali lasts for two days and on the second night families pray and feast and set off fireworks to ward off evil, spirits. People exchange gifts, often coconut sweets and small sugar discs.

**The third candle was also for a celebration in winter, the Jewish festival of Hanukkah (Chanukah) 12<sup>th</sup> – 20<sup>th</sup> December 2017, the festival of lights** – when candles are lit on an eight-branched candlestick. The candles are to remind them of the re-capturing of the Temple of Jerusalem more than 2000 years ago. Each candle represents one night of the festival and each night families recite special blessings before the meal. Jewish children play games, one in particular is Dreidel, where they pin a four-sided top, and the winners receive a pile of chocolate coins. Each side of the top is marked with a Hebrew initial and represents the sentence, *“A great miracle happened there.”* Many Jewish children receive eight tiny presents, one each day and then one big present – again not unlike Christmas here. A kind of po-

tato cake called latka is made from grated potatoes, onions, flour and eggs then fried in olive oil. The oil represents the oil lamp that burned in the temple for eight days; the latkes are eaten with apple sauce and sour cream. Like the Hindus, Jewish families exchange presents.

**The fourth candle was for Advent and Christmas, a great Christian midwinter festival celebrating the birth of a baby, not unlike the first candle for a birthday.** Here in Britain we hold Christmas Eve on December 24<sup>th</sup> and celebrate the expectation of a baby's arrival culminating the next day with the birth and the exchanging of presents. In the Special School all the children understood the meaning of a celebration; those that could see enjoyed the glow of the candles especially when the school lights were extinguished. Those with poor eyesight could smell the wax and one scented candle was especially for them. We sat in silence for a little time looking at the candles and those that couldn't see had the scene described to them before the silence. In our silence we thought of all the school families and their celebrations. For one family a birthday, for another family Diwali, for a third family the forthcoming Hanukkah, for many families the events leading to Christmas. And what symbolised all these things? A single candle for each event.

These candlesticks were given to our Oxford congregation following a wedding I conducted, the bride had Christian roots and the groom Sikh roots, they now have four children and will be lighting candles for their celebrations. Lighting a candle is such a simple act and yet the meaning is immense. One single candle can have a meaning which reaches far beyond any one Sunday, any one festival so light a candle today and give it your own meaning.

**What of babies?** Here in this chapel we have several depictions of babies and children. In front of you in the tiny rose window there is a scene of the nativity, the birth of Jesus surrounded by six angels. Below you see Mary described not as a virgin but as the mother and then, unlike most other churches and chapels, Joseph the father of

Jesus appears, suggesting that this was a traditional birth and no more miraculous than any other birth. That's a real Unitarian thought for Christmas, a baby born of two human parents. In the rear window we see more children and they are being blessed by Jesus.

Many of the Christmas stories (and the births of other great figures in history) emphasise the miraculous, but if we see the stories as myths we can sense some truth in them. During more than fifty years of ministry I have conducted hundreds of naming ceremonies for babies and, in my Unitarian view, everyone has been and is special. No baby is born in sin and needs sins washing away, my view of babies is that they all



have tremendous potential and should be encouraged to try and create a better world. My belief in babies is that of the New York Unitarian educator Sophia Lyon Fahs who lived to be a great great grandmother and wrote these words, 'Each night a child is born is a holy night.' Here are her words in full.

And so the children come  
and so they have been coming,  
Each night a child is born is a holy night.  
Always in the same way they come –  
Born of the seed of man and woman.  
No angels herald the glory of their beginnings.  
No prophets predict their future courses  
No wise men see a star to show where to find  
The babe that will save humankind.  
Yet each night a child is born is a holy night.

Fathers and mothers –  
Sitting beside their children's cribs –  
Feel glory in the wondrous sight of a new life beginning.  
They ask, "Where and how will this new life end?  
Or will it ever end?"

Each night a child is born is a holy night –  
A time for singing—  
A time for worshipping.  
For heaven and earth are joined in the new creation.

Sadly, not all babies have the same opportunities and even as we enjoy our festivals some will be starving and dying, often because of man's inhumanity to man.

**Thirdly I believe in Father and Mother Christmas, in the spirit of sharing.** Once again, I can interpret the Christmas myths in relation to human life. After our daughter was born we experienced the story of the Wise Men, the Shepherds and the Kings and it was through human beings.

On the day our daughter was due home I had the funeral of a member of our chapel who was over 100 years of age and so I couldn't collect Heddwen and our new daughter Bethan; a kind member of the chapel offered to bring them home in her car and so as I headed for the crematorium in a Rolls Royce hearse Heddwen and Bethan passed me in a Mercedes driven by a good **friend**. A day later two women neighbours brought over simple gifts, a pair of tiny booties and a knitted bonnet – **now isn't that the Christmas story, repeated over and over again in many of our lives.** Kind neighbours and friends replaced the Wise Men, Shepherds and Three Kings.

The Christmas I knew as a child, the stories of one baby becoming a saviour for the whole world and teaching the only truth are no longer my Christmas. My Unitarian Christmas is a great midwinter festival,

full of wonderful stories, carols and myths, a universal festival for the world, for I believe in candles, babies, in Father and Mother Christmas, in light, children, generosity and sharing.

I end with the first verse of what I think is one of the best carols ever written although in Britain you hardly ever hear it sung beyond Unitarian churches and chapels. The Unitarian Henry Longfellow wrote the words.

I heard the bells on Christmas Day  
Their old familiar carols play,  
And wild and sweet  
The words repeat,  
Of "Peace on earth, good will to men!"

*(Ed Note: Advent 3rd December – 24th December 2017. For Christians this is a time of waiting and preparation for the Nativity on the 25th December. It begins on the fourth Sunday before the Nativity. It is the beginning of the Christian liturgical year.)*

## **The Birthday of Guru Nanak – 4<sup>th</sup> November 2017**

### **Sikh Festival**

**By Naomi Linnell**

#### **The Festival of Guru Nanak Gurburab**

*Festival of the Birthday of Guru Nanak*

At the end of 1499, in his thirtieth year,  
Guru Nanak asked 'Whose path shall I follow?  
For there is neither Hindu nor Mussalman,  
and God is neither Mussalman nor Hindu,  
but only Man; and in my devotion to him,  
I choose now to follow only his holy path.

"I have seen the court of God, and drunk  
the cup of the adoration of God.  
And God said 'I bless you and raise you up.  
Rejoice in my name and teach others  
to do so, and let this be your calling.' "  
And thus the seeds of Sikhism were planted.

Guru Nanak, the first of the ten Gurus,  
taught there is but one God, with no barrier,  
no priest, no ritual between God and  
his people of whatsoever caste or gender.  
There is one pervading spirit called truth,  
timeless, free from fear, loving and universal.

Sikhs from all the world over celebrate  
the birthday of Guru Nanak, founding father  
of their faith. For forty-eight long hours  
the Sri Guru Granth Sahib is read aloud,  
for it is a spiritual guide for all humanity,  
and the Sikhs' sacred book and eternal Guru.

Kirtans - Hymns from the Guru Granth Sahib - are sung in the Gurdwaras to honour the old Gurus, for they believed that worship through music brought a state of bliss and communion with God. The Gurdwaras are decorated with flowers, and the streets are rainbows of colour and joy.

In Manchester, England, May 2017, faithful to the teachings of their Gurus, were the Sikh men and women who stood steadfast beside their sisters and brothers of all faiths and none, who opened their temples offering a meal to eat and a bed to lie on.

There, also, were the turbaned taxi drivers who tirelessly gave a free service to all in need, that accompanied by these warriors of love and peace, the shattered and the shocked might be comforted and restored to the safety of their own homes. Our world is blessed by their presence here.

*Foot notes: The Guru is a teacher and messenger sent by God to enlighten mankind. Blessed with divine grace, Gurus became guides on the spiritual path.*

*Kirtan: sacred Hymns from the Guru Granth Sahiib, originated in the Hindu tradition as loving Sikhs are urged to sing or listen to Kirtan as often as possible*

## **Bodhi Day 8<sup>th</sup> December 2017 – Buddhist Festival**

This Buddhist festival celebrates the enlightenment of Siddarta Gautama in 596 BC. This young prince abandoned his life of privilege and luxury and went on both an inner and outer journey finally becoming the Buddha. Meditating under a Bodhi tree, a sacred fig tree belonging to the family *Ficus religiosa*, he faced many demons but continued until he attained enlightenment. He saw that everyone and everything was connected. This led him to create the foundations of Buddhism: The Four Noble Truths and the Eight-Fold Path. (See the June 2017 issue of *Viewpoint*).

On 8<sup>th</sup> December families decorate a *Ficus Religiosa* tree with beads, coloured lights and three shiny ornaments to represent the Three Jewels: The Buddha, the teachings and the community of Buddhists. Homes are decorated with lights, symbolising many pathways to enlightenment. A candle is lit on Bodhi Day, which is a day of remembrance and meditation. The lights and candle are lit each evening for the following thirty days. Children make biscuits in the shape of a leaf, in remembrance of the tree under which the Buddha sat, or in the shape of a heart. A meal of rice and milk is often shared as it is thought that this was the first meal offered to the Buddha following his 'awakening'.

## **Winter Solstice/Yule/Midwinter - 21<sup>st</sup> December**

### **Tony McNeile**

The meaning of the word 'Solstice' is 'Standing still'. The sun has journeyed south taking our daylight with it and leaving us with long cold nights. At last it stops its journey and pauses, standing still as if with indecision on whether to travel on or return.

In the cold north the people overcome the darkness of the longest night by having a party. They will decorate the houses with holly and ivy to represent the male and female deities and to remind themselves that not all greenery has perished in the winter. Bonfires are lit as if to encourage the sun to make that northward journey. A growing fir tree was brought into the house and decorated with candles. In Roman times the partying centred around the god Saturn. The feast of Saturnalia was the time to turn the world upside down. On the shortest day roles in the household were reversed. The slave became the master and the master waited on the slave, men and women reversed clothes. Everyone exchanged presents

The traditions continue to the present day. In my time in the forces, the officers served lunch to the soldiers on Christmas Day. The pantomime is a fairy story where the principal boy is a girl and the female characters are played by men. Houses are decorated with evergreens and the Christmas tree is decorated with lights. A special cake, the yule log has become the bonfire.

Christianity was never going to suppress such a long-held tradition but added to it the nativity story of god being reborn as the light of the world. Eventually the Nativity story came to dominate the old pagan festivals but like the fires of hope they could never be extinguished.

## **Epiphany 6<sup>th</sup> January – Christian Festival**

This is one of the oldest Christian festivals, celebrated since the end of 2 BCE. It is celebrated in different ways around the world. For the West it commemorates the coming of the Magi and is the first manifestation of Christ to the Gentiles. The Eastern Church commemorates it as the baptism of Christ. Both the USA and Spain call it Three Kings Day, the latter seeing it as a major Christmas tradition demonstrating the generosity of giving presents. Entire cities throughout

Spain celebrate. Twelfth Night, signifies the end of the holiday season, when decorations are taken down.

### **Vasant Pandami 22nd January 2018 - Hindu Festival**

Vasant Panchami day is dedicated to Saraswati, Goddess of knowledge, music, arts, science and technology. This is the day when lethargy is shaken off and Spring slowly begins. Families come together to worship (puja) and ask for blessings from the Goddess for their children to be blessed with good knowledge. Puja is also performed in educational institutions on this day. Puja is worship and an offering of specially prepared food, called Prasad, which is offered to the Goddess and later eaten by the worshippers. This festival is particularly important in the Eastern states of India.



### **Imbolc 1<sup>st</sup> February 2018 - Pagan Festival** **Tony McNeile**

‘When will winter ever end?’ January’s grip of cold and ice seems escape proof. And then on one cold day at the beginning of February there comes a change of mood. It feels as if the spell has been broken. At first it is only a feeling but all of nature responds with it. This is Imbolc (pronounced without sounding the b). Nothing seems to have changed but it has. In folklore, the crone has changed to the maiden. In Ireland there was a tradition of placing children’s clothes outside the door to be blessed by Brigid as she dashed around the country from house to house. Country dwellers see that the ewes in the fields have started to lactate in readiness for the birth of their lambs. Farmers feel the soil and it is warmer so dormant seeds are

going to germinate. Birds are starting to pair off and the time has arrived to start building a nest. It is a time of hope. No more surviving winter but now looking forward.

Many people will prepare their 'Vision Board'. On it will be the promises they have made to themselves about what they are going to achieve during the coming months, and the things they are no longer going to do!. They place the board in a prominent place in the house, usually where they have to walk past it day by day. They will be constantly reminded of what they plan and promise to achieve. Imbolc bids farewell to winter and looks forward to spring.

**Lupercalia** is a pre-Christian religious festival of purification which was held on the fifteenth of February. Lupercus was the Roman god of shepherds. For this festival the priests dressed up in goat skins and animals were sacrificed. The ceremony ended up as a bit of a wild party as priests, with whips, chased the young men and women, hoping to purge evil spirits out of them. For the young men and women, it was a risky courting ritual as they fled together to safe hiding places.

Lupercalia is said to be one of the origins of our Valentine's Day. It was said to be just as risky for young soldiers to receive love letters from young women because they might lose the will to fight. The exchange of such letters was banned but luckily for the young people Bishop Valentine was happy to secretly pass on the billet doux but advised not putting names to them.

### **Shevat (Arbor Day ) 11<sup>th</sup> February 2018 – Jewish Festival**

This festival is one of the four Jewish New Years, in this case it is sometimes known as the 'New Year for Trees', celebrating the emergence of agriculture and new growth after the winter rest. Families come together to feast, especially food associated with the Holy Land, and to drink wine. Trees are planted, sometimes in memory of

a loved one, traditionally a cedar for a boy or a cypress for a girl. Children's awareness of the environment and understanding of ecology is accompanied by planting trees in Israel. Elsewhere money can be collected and given towards the planting of trees. Although this day is not a public holiday in the UK, some government departments, businesses and educational institutions mark this day in their calendars. Some Jewish organisations may close or offer limited services on this day.

### **Parinirvana 15<sup>th</sup> February 2018 – Buddhist Festival**

Parinirvana Day was established to celebrate the enlightenment of Buddha and to honour his death, aged 80, when he was released from physical suffering and from the cycle of death and rebirth. It is celebrated by Mahayana Buddhists throughout the world. His final words were: 'All conditioned things are subject to decay. Strive for your liberation with diligence'. He then went into a deep meditation and died later. The day can be celebrated in different ways. Some spend the day in deep meditations, others read from 'Parinibana Sutta', which describe the last days of Buddha, a pilgrimage may be made to a Buddhist shrine, known as a Stupa and those in a monastery may treat it as a social day with those outside the monastery bringing in gifts and food to share with the monks. In art a reclining Buddha usually represents Parinirvana.



## **Losar Festival/Tibetan New Year 16<sup>th</sup> February 2018**

Although targeting prospective travelers to this festival the following website is informative as well as providing some excellent images.

<https://www.tibettravel.org/tibetan-festivals/tibetan-new-year.html>

## **Shrove Tuesday 13<sup>th</sup> February 2018 – Christian Festival**

This is also known as Pancake Day in the UK when we clear out our cupboards of stored food in preparation for the Lent period, leading up to Easter.

<https://www.timeanddate.com/holidays/uk/shrove-tuesday>

## **Ash Wednesday 14<sup>th</sup> February 2018 – Christian Festival**

This day is the beginning of Lent. The following website offers information about Ash Wednesday and how it is observed in different parts of the world.

<https://www.timeanddate.com/holidays/common/carnival-wednesday>

## **Lent 14<sup>th</sup> February – 29<sup>th</sup> March 2018 – Christian Festival**

The following website explains the differences of ending dates between the Western and Eastern Churches as well as covering what Lent means to Christians and the variation of emphasis given to it.

<http://www.calendarpedia.com/when-is/lent.html>

## Christmas Offering from Naomi Linnell

### What can we give him?

Long days on the dusty road  
from Nazareth to Bethlehem,  
Joseph led his patient donkey  
carrying Mary, great with child,  
exhausted, and drooping  
like a pale lily wilting in the sun,  
until at last they came to the town  
its dark streets silent and empty.

There was no room in the Inn  
for these tired late comers,  
only a stable where oxen slept,  
with an old wooden manger  
filled with sweet new hay,  
a bed for the baby now born  
in this blessed oasis of calm  
at the end of their long journey.

Oxen and donkey knelt  
and quietly watched over him  
as he lay, face shining with light,  
in his borrowed manger crib.  
A sleek white faced barn-owl  
trumpeted to the sleeping world  
to greet the king newly come  
to the little town of Bethlehem.

Blackbirds sang the night through,  
while chattering sparrows brought  
downy feathers to the stable,  
a soft coverlet for the baby.  
Red foxes and yellow necked mice  
gathered together in peace,  
for there was neither hunting  
nor death this holy night of nights.

Shepherds watching in the fields  
heard the song of the angels  
proclaiming God's birth in man.  
Their sheep sleeping peacefully,  
they went to find the precious child,  
to kneel with oxen and donkey,  
to greet this new king of kings,  
and to offer their hearts to him.

Two thousand years have passed,  
and the baby born in Bethlehem  
lives within us still, and teaches us  
to give our hearts to our loving God.

May God be praised. Amen

## **Comments -**

We welcome your comments on this issue. With your permission your comments might also be included in the NUF Newsletter.

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