

## DIWALI – A CHRISTIAN PERSPECTIVE

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The earthen lamp is a very common symbol of Diwali. In Gujarati there is a proverb, which says that the lamp shines the brightest when it goes home. Similarly as we light hundreds of lamps on Diwali we can say that when Diwali comes the lamps shine the brightest.

Diwali is celebrated in whole world wherever there are Indians. But in India Diwali is celebrated by the followers of all religions by lighting the earthen lamps and in some cases candles. While celebrating Diwali this year let us dwell a little while about the ideals and the understanding of Diwali in a Christian perspective.

Traditionally we light earthen lamps celebrating the victory of Ram over Ravana. We also remember King Vikramaditya's victory over his enemies. Every Diwali we also celebrate the event of Vishnu Bhagavan destroying Narkasur, the demon of hell.

From a religious point of view, all religion give great significance to light and lamp giving light. The lamps and lights have great importance in the Christian worship and other religious rites and sacraments.

The traditional use of lights and candles in Christianity is inherited from four different sources: First, Jewish religion; second, Pagan and civil use; third, ordinary need and usefulness; and fourth natural symbol.

According to the law given by Moses, the Jews use golden candle lamp-stand with six branches. The lamp-stand has seven lamps. The lamps are so set up that they shine towards the front (see Ex. 25, 31-37). The lamp-stand with seven lamps is a symbol of Jewish religion.

The Jews burn lamps at the altar of their temple. In the Feast of Dedication of the Temple, the Jews light so many lamps that the feast is called 'Hanukkah', that is, "Feast of Light"!

In ancient times the Pagans had the custom of burning lamps or lighting candles at their holy places and in front of statues of their gods. On feast days they used to lit lamps and put them on the doorposts. There was also the custom of people burning lamps in front of statues of Roman emperors.

From the time of the invention of fire and light, the need and usefulness of fire and light have been universally accepted. Before the invention of electricity people have had only fire and lamps for light to drive away darkness. Even today people in interior villages use all types of lamps for light where electricity has not reached yet.

Lamps and lights have unique significance in Christian religion. In the Old Testament of the Bible. The first words spoken by God in the first book of the Bible are, "Let there be lights" (Gen. 1, 3). The Bible uses symbols like light, fire, lightening, etc. to indicate the presence of God and his dealing with men and women of ancient times.

Prophet Ezekiel says, "The dazzling light of the Lord's presence rose up from the creatures and moved to the entrance of the Temple. Then, the cloud filled the Temple and the courtyard was blazing with the light" (Ezekiel 10, 4). The Book of Baruch concludes that "God will lead Israel home... surrounded by the light of his glorious presence" (Baruch 5, 9).

Prophet Isaiah prophesying about 'the Lord's Servant', meaning Jesus Christ says, "Through you I will make a covenant with all peoples; through you I will bring light to the nations" (Isaiah 42, 6). Thus we see innumerable references to light, lamp and fire, etc. in Old Testament.

The symbolic language of fire, lamp, light, etc. is also in the New Testament of the Bible. St. John referring to Jesus Christ says, "The Word was the source of life, and this life brought light

to humankind. The light shines in the darkness” (John 1, 4-5). In the New Testament Jesus is often referred to as “Light of humankind”, “A light to reveal God’s will to the Gentiles”, “True light, which enlightens everyone”, “the light of the world”, etc.

The Jesus himself has compared his followers as light and has said, “You are like light for the whole world. A city built on a hill cannot be hidden. No one lights a lamp and puts it under a bowl; instead he puts it on the lamp stand, where it gives light for everyone in the house. In the same way your light must shine before people, so that they will see the good things you do and praise your Father in heaven” (Mt. 5, 14-16).

In all the celebrations of liturgy and sacraments in the Christian religion light in the form of oil lamps or candles are obligatory. All Christian prayers and devotions are held in all churches with lighted lamps or candles on the altar. A lighted lamp or candle is the symbol of the presence of Jesus in the Church. So Catholic Christians burn perpetually oil lamps, candles or in some cases electrical bulbs indicating the presence of Jesus in the blessed sacrament in the sanctuary of the Church.

Christmas liturgical celebrations are held in Christian Churches centred around light / fire as Jesus is seen as the Divine Light. Similarly the Easter, that is, the Feast of the Resurrection of Jesus, is also liturgically celebrated around a new fire and then lighting the ‘Easter Candle’ from the fire recalling that Jesus himself has said, “I have come into the world as light” (John 12, 46). Christians in India join the people of other faiths to celebrate the Diwali with enthusiasm and gusto. Christians too like the people of other faiths lit numerous lights, earthen lamps or candles and put them on places like balconys and courtyards of their houses. They often join their neighbours in the celebrations of Diwali, the festival of light by personal visits and sharing sweets and other gifts.