Festivals of Light within the World Religions

Teacher Background

The calendars of the world’s religions are punctuated with festivals. While some festivals focus on the divine, others celebrate elements of nature. Festivals of light are common in many religions. They include: Divali, Hanukkah and Easter.

Divali (Hinduism)

Hindu calendars are lunar so most Hindu festivals take place in the middle of the month when the moon is full, or at the end when it just about to return as the new moon. Divali takes place at the end of the month of Ashvin and carries on into the month of Kartik (October – November in a western calendar). In most places it is officially a three day festival, but it usually last for five days and includes the beginning of the financial year.

Divali means lights and throughout the festival Hindus decorate their home, mandirs and other buildings with rows of lights. In the past, small clay lamps called divas were used, giving the festival its name. Today electric lights are often used instead. Divali remembers several different stories. One of the stories is connected to Lakshmi the goddess who brings good fortune. For people who own businesses, Divali is especially important because they believe that Lakshmi helps their businesses do well.

Divali comes at the end of the financial year, so they make sure that their account books are up to date and that all their debts are paid. They can then start the New Year well. Divali is a family festival; People give each other presents and share meals with friends and family.

Hanukkah (Judaism)

Hanukkah is an eight-day Jewish festival. It is celebrated in the Jewish month of Kislev around late November and early December in the western calendar. Hanukkah commemorates the victory of the Jewish army lead by Judah the Maccabean over the Syrian Greeks lead by Antiochus IV. The festival commemorates a tradition that after the Maccabeans had recaptured the Temple there was enough oil for the relighting the Temple Menorah for just one day. However it was said a miracle occurred which allowed the candle to stay lit for eight days.

Chanukah (Hanukkah) on the net is an excellent website containing the history of the story of Hanukkah how the ritual is celebrated, as well as foods and activities for Hanukkah It can be located at: www.holidays.net/chanukah.

Easter (Christianity)

The major festival of light which takes place in both the Roman and Eastern Christian traditions is Easter. Traditionally celebrated at the Easter Vigil ceremony on Saturday evening, the ritual of light begins outside the church with the lighting of the Paschal fire. In the Roman rite the flame from the fire is then transferred into the church via the Paschal Candle. As the priest processes through the darkened church with the candle he sings “Christ our Light” three times to which the congregation responds “Thanks be to God”. With each sung antiphon the pitch rises. More elaborate and lengthy ceremonies are common within the Eastern Christian rites.